

O. Penn-
Coughin

A horror-themed Christmas card. The central image is a close-up of a skull with a menacing, wide grin showing sharp teeth. The skull is wearing a red Santa hat with a white pom-pom and a white beard. The background is dark with out-of-focus Christmas lights in red, green, and white. The title 'A VERY SCARY CHRISTMAS' is written in a red, jagged, horror-style font at the bottom.

**A VERY SCARY
CHRISTMAS**

A VERY SCARY CHRISTMAS

by

O. Penn-Coughin

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YOU COME TOO PUBLISHING

Introduction

A Very Scary Christmas attempts to bring together a few of my favorite things: Halloween and Christmas.

If the ghost of John Lennon were here, he'd tell you that the world would be a better place if scary stories, good will toward men, free candy, and peace on earth could just get along. And he would be right.

Like the stories in the entire *They're Coming For You: Scary Stories that Scream to be Read* series, these tales can be read out loud. (Instructions are included.) Some end with a scream. So, if you are sharing them with someone else, cut loose when you see an **AAAAH!** And if you should find yourself alone on a silent night, treat yourself. Go ahead and scream, too.

All right then. Scary Christmas to all, and to all a good fright.

AAAAH!

O. Penn-Coughin
The South Pole

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[WINTER NIGHTMARES](#)... 15 chilling tales (stories with an icy theme collected from the first six volumes of *They're Coming For You: Scary Stories that Scream to be Read*)

[A GIFT](#)... A special present for fans of O. Penn-Coughin

Frosty the Bloody Snowman

Frosty was gone. All that was left of the jolly snowman was a corn cob pipe, a button, two lumps of coal, an old silk hat, and a sad puddle of water.

"I'll save you, Frosty," Karen said through her sobs. "I'll save you."

But first she needed something to put the melted snow in.

The hat, she thought.

Then she took off a sock and used it to soak up the water. She held it over the hat and wrung it dry. She repeated this more than a hundred times until there wasn't a single drop left.

Karen raced home and transferred the contents of the hat into a plastic water bottle. Then she labeled it *Frosty*.

"I'll bring you back to life on the first cold day," she whispered as she put the bottle in the back of the freezer. "I promise."

As it turned out that wasn't until mid-January.

"The weatherman says it's going to snow tomorrow," Karen's mom said.

"Yippie!" Karen shouted.

She went to the refrigerator and took out the water bottle. The ice inside looked dark and murky.

The next day it snowed so much they closed the schools.

Karen called her friends and asked them to help her build a snowman. When they were finished she poured the water bottle into the old silk hat and then put the hat on the snowman's head.

"Come back to me, Frosty," she whispered with her eyes closed. "Come back, Frosty."

Suddenly thunder crashed and the smell of sour milk and Munster cheese filled the air. (Not the pasteurized, American kind either.)

When Karen opened her eyes, the snowman was scratching himself. He then stared at her with hate in his eyes.

"What are you looking at?" he said. "Do I know you or something?"

"Don't you remember me, Frosty?" Karen said. "I'm Karen. I'm the one who brought you back to life, Frosty."

"Who's Frosty?" he asked. "My name's Chilblains."

The snowman then picked up a hard chunk of ice and nailed one of other kids in the eye with it. Then he kicked a dog that had been sniffing at his feet.

"Boo!" he shouted, scattering the rest of Karen's friends.

"What's wrong, Frosty?" she said.

"I told you, my name's Chilblains. I'm outta here."

"Wait. Where are you going?"

"I've got a score to settle with a certain magician."

"But, Frosty," Karen said. "Santa forgave Professor Hinkle."

"Santa and this Frosty you keep talking about can do whatever the hell they want," he said. "Chilblains doesn't forget. And he doesn't forgive."

"What about the Christmas spirit?"

"It's January, girly," the malevolent snowman said, his eyes glowing with evil. "Christmas is over."

Karen began to cry.

“You only have yourself to blame,” he said, walking away. “Who knew the sock juice of a little girl could hold so much evil? So much putrid, reeking, stinking, delicious evil. Try washing your feet sometime.”

Then he started laughing. There was a darkness in his laughter that caused Karen to start shivering and shaking and drooling uncontrollably.

That was the last day anyone ever saw Professor Hinkle.

When the police went to his house, the only trace of the magician they found was his barbershop quartet moustache... *still attached to his upper lip.*

Frosty or Chilblains—whoever or whatever he was—had turned cannibal.



Ears Looking at You

Walter Peabody had his friend Brad take the North Pole Toy Making Test for him.

"I gotta have that job," he said.

But once he was hired, there was no hiding the fact that Walter was the worst toy maker that ever was. His disastrous creations were so bad that they were even rejected by the Island of Misfit Toys.

The old man was patient with him at first, but the other elves grew tired of covering for him.

"We all have to work that much harder to make up for your crap," Ernie said.

"Yeah," Mike said. "Santa needs to can your *ass*-paragus and hire an elf with some skills."

Walter's days were numbered.

One day in early January, Santa called Walter into his office.

"I'm letting you go," he said. "I'm sorry, Walter, toy making just isn't in your blood."

"Just give me one more chance," Walter pleaded.

"What's gonna change if I give you another chance?"

"Please, Santa. Just one more chance. You'll see."

"Oh, all right. Cupid's swamped this year. I suppose I could let you work on Valentine's Day presents for him."

"Thank you. Oh, thank you, Santa. You won't regret it."

But as Walter walked away, he didn't know what would be different or why Santa wouldn't come to regret his decision.

Maybe he's right, Walter thought. *Maybe toy making's just not in my blood.*

That night Walter had a dream.

"My blood," he kept mumbling in his sleep. "My blood. My blood. My blood running down the side of my head."

When he woke up, Walter knew what he had to do.

He went into the kitchen and found a sharp knife.

The screams could be heard all over the Arctic Circle.

"What do you have for me, Walter?" Cupid said a few days later.

"Okay, here it is," Walter said. "And I even have the advertising campaign to go with it."

"Hit me," Cupid said.

"Well, you know the story of how Van Gogh cut off his own ear, right?"

"Yes, go on."

"Okay, here's the slogan: 'You may not be a world famous artist, but you can still show her how you feel this Valentine's Day by giving her the ear of one.'"

Walter then handed Cupid a small red velvet box.

"What is it?"

"Look for yourself."

Cupid opened the box.

Inside was a gold-plated ear attached to a chain necklace.

"It's amazing," Cupid said, shooting himself with one of his own arrows. "Such detail... it's so realistic. I love it!"

Walter didn't say anything. He just smiled.

Cupid got on the phone to Santa.

"This kid you sent me, Nick, he's all right," the happy cherub said. "I tell you he's all right!"

“I’ll take 200!” Cupid shouted after he hung up.
“Two hundred?” Walter thought. “Where am I going to get 200 ea—”
Then he looked out the window and saw the other elves returning from lunch.
He smiled.

The Nutcracker

Fritz was snoring loudly as the snow fell silently outside his window on Christmas Eve.

He suddenly awoke to the sound of the floorboards creaking.

“Who’s there?” Fritz whispered.

A large shadow was standing at the foot of the bed.

“Who are you?” Fritz said, hoping it was St. Nick. “What do you want?”

“You shouldn’t have broken my jaw with that walnut tonight,” the shadow said.

With shaking fingers, Fritz lit the candle on his nightstand. A giant nutcracker was standing there. He had a terrible look on what was left of his face.

“Do you see what you’ve done?” he mumbled, holding out his bloody wooden jaw in his hands. “Now it’s your turn!”

The nutcracker came closer. Fritz screamed and screamed and screamed some more. The pain was horrible. Horrible. So horrible...

In the morning Fritz reached up and felt around his face.

“Oh, good,” he said in a freakishly high-pitched voice. “It was just a dream.”

And then he started screaming again.



Fruitcake

The holidays had come and gone. The ornaments and lights had been put away. The tree hauled off by Boy Scouts for \$5. The bottles of Christmas cheer, now sad and empty, crowded together for warmth in the dark recycle bin dreaming of another chance. The presents were all but forgotten.

And still it remained. There in the middle of the kitchen table. Untouched. Invisible? Sacred? Both? Neither?

More like nether. As in the netherworld below our feet.

Wrapped in red ribbon. How apropos. Waiting. Waiting in cellophane silence. Waiting for its chance. To corrupt. To take over my will. To cannibalize my soul. With its cherries and cranberries and walnuts. With its Scrooge-rationed flour and powdered sugar and bits of glowing green weirdness.

I feel its evil growing with each passing day. All I seek is to be rid of it. A little peace.

But it will not let me be.

Oh, fruitcake most vile, away with thee.

You laugh, of course, thinking me mad or comical, safe in your easy chair in front of the fire. By the way, is that a Snuggie you have on? If so, are you in any position to laugh? In any case, you would not do so if you were here in its presence.

I have conducted an investigation as to how it got inside the house. As with most things evil, I have to believe that someone invited it in.

And yet they deny any knowledge of it.

“Are you sure *you* didn’t bring it in?” one says. “I could have sworn I saw you come home with it under your arm in early December.”

“Wasn’t me,” says I.

They eye me strangely. As if my word is something to be doubted.

But they are the ones that cannot be trusted. I have to assume they are all under its spell.

It is up to me.

After all, I am the one who hears the voices at night. They whisper when they think I am sleeping.

But that is not all.

Lately, more and more, I hear them in my head. Sending me instructions.

One bite.

Just one bite.

And just this morning I found myself with a plate in one hand and a butter knife in the other. Sitting in front of it. I did not know how I had gotten there or what I was thinking.

The trash man comes tomorrow. I will throw it out while no one is looking. They will not miss it. And if someone should ask I will answer honestly. “Yes, it was I. I tossed it. And what of it? Who among you was going to bite into its almonds, its raisins, its candied peels and brandied prunes?”

I try to pick it up, but it holds fast as if nailed to the table. It will not budge. I strain and pull and tear fibers and muscles. I hear the bones in my back crack from the terrible strain of its diabolical weight. And finally feel it move. I wrap my fingers and hands and arms under and around it and stagger toward the trash.

I only manage a few steps and realize I'm not going to make it. Ten feet away still and my legs are finished. I toss it toward the trash can. It falls hopelessly short, smashing into the tile floor. And through it. Disappearing down, down, down. Back from where it came.

I have done it. I will deal with the damage later. For now all I can think is... I have done it!

And then smoke and fire and a ghastly smell rise up from the hole. I take a step back and then another. I am too late, too slow. It dawns on me the only thing I have done is open a portal. And then I hear the growling. A moment later a dozen fire-breathing hellhounds leap from the hole and rip me to pieces. When all that is left of me is little more than my bloodied and broken spirit, they stop and disappear back in the hole.

Then, like an infernal vacuum cleaner, a hot breeze sucks me down behind them...

My wounds have all healed as if by miracle. But there are no miracles down here. I'm chained to a table. The fruitcake is across from me. It has taken the form of a demon and forces me to eat of its candied flesh. I cannot scream. I cannot vomit. I can only chew and swallow.

Forever.

Bite after bite after bite after bite after—

AAAAH!



The Red-Nosed One

Rudolph had a very shiny nose.

And it was covered in blood.

Your blood.

Ahahahahahahaaaa...

AAAAH!



A Dish Best Served Cold

Halfway through the last football game of the day, Phillip dozed off. Stuffed with turkey, gravy, cranberry sauce, cornbread stuffing, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, asparagus tips, biscuits, and pumpkin and pecan pie, his large gut rose up and down to the rhythm of his loud snores.

Over in the kitchen, the carcass of the large bird still sat legs up on the counter. Suddenly it turned over on its side and then eased itself down onto the floor.

"It's cold in here," it said, shivering.

Phillip moaned in his sleep.

The turkey sashayed through the dining room into the living room and stopped in front of the fireplace. It rubbed what was left of its turkey butt with its wing tips.

"That's better," it sighed. "Now it's time for some payback."

The turkey went over to Phillip and smiled. It pulled out its own wishbone and used it to cut into the sleeping man.

When Phillip woke up he couldn't see the TV. His eyes were gone. There were just two black holes leaking brain gravy down his cheeks. When he tried to stand, he just fell over. One of his legs was missing.

The turkey smiled and took another bite from the drumstick. Then it tossed what was left of Phillip's leg into the fireplace.

Christmas Tree

Justin and Kathleen were snowshoeing in the forest looking for the perfect tree. This was going to be their first Christmas together.

"What about this one?" Justin said after a while.

"I kind of like this one here," Kathleen said, eyeing a 12-footer.

"You got it."

Justin pulled the saw from his pack, laid down a tarp, and got down to work.

It began to snow gently.

"It's so beautiful out here," Kathleen said.

She headed off to a nearby clump of trees.

"I'll be right back."

"I'll be right here," Justin said from under the tree.

An icy cold breeze blew through the forest.

"Kathleen."

"What?" Kathleen said.

"I didn't say anything," Justin said.

"If you say so."

"I say so."

Ten minutes later Justin was just about finished.

"You want to do the honors?" he said, holding out the saw.

"Sure."

They traded places and he held the tree while she sawed through the last of it.

"Timber!" he said, shoving it away from them.

He wrapped the tree in the tarp and secured it with some bungee cords.

"This is going to be the best Christmas ever," she said.

"No doubt. Hey, I want to show you something before we head back. There's a waterfall near here that's really awesome in winter. We can leave the tree here and get it on the way back. Should only be a few minutes."

"Lead the way," Kathleen said.

The snow began to come down harder. Soon the breeze turned into something stronger.

"The weatherman said it was supposed to be sunny," Justin said, squinting as huge white flakes peppered his face.

"The one on TV?" Kathleen said. "That guy can barely speak. And he's a total idiot. He should change his name to Ed. *Special Ed*."

Justin laughed.

"How much farther?"

"Should be almost there."

They soon heard the roar of the water. A few minutes later they arrived at the foot of the 100-foot falls.

"Wow, look at those humungous icicles," Kathleen said. "This is amazing."

"Yeah, killer."

The wind was ripping into them now.

"We should start heading back," Justin said.

"Stay a little longer, Kathleen."

"Did you say something?" she said.

"Nah, must be the wind."

They plowed on in silence for a while. The trail and their original footprints had disappeared under the driving snow.

The storm was a full-blown blizzard now.

"Why couldn't we have just bought our tree at the store like everyone else?" Kathleen sighed.

"Next thing you'll be wanting one of those plastic, faux trees."

"We don't get back to the car soon and I just might."

"I've been waiting for you, Kathleen."

"Cut it out," she said.

"Cut what out?" Justin said.

"I'm not in the mood to play games," Kathleen said, her teeth chattering like a skeleton gone wild. "Just get us out of here."

"I'm working on it, but I don't know what games you're talking about."

"Shouldn't we be back by now?" Kathleen said half an hour later.

"You're right," Justin said. "I'm afraid we might have gone the wrong way."

"That's just great," she mumbled, her lips beginning to turn a little blue.

"I think we should backtrack to the waterfall and start again," Justin said.

"All right."

They turned around but they could barely see the tracks they had made a minute earlier.

One of the straps holding her left snowshoe in place had become loose and Kathleen stopped to tighten it.

"Hold up," she called out, barely able to hear herself in the storm.

She couldn't grip the strap with her glove, so she had to take it off.

"It's so cold," she said, shivering.

When she looked up, Justin was gone, swallowed up by all the whiteness.

"Hey!" Kathleen yelled, her heart racing. "Justin!"

She started running, following the faint traces of his footprints. She went on like this until her lungs burned with the icy air she was sucking in.

She stopped and gasped his name.

"Justin."

"I'm right here, Kathleen."

"What? Where are you?"

The wind battered her like a baseball bat and Kathleen felt colder than she had ever felt in her entire life.

She began to cry, the tears freezing on her red cheeks.

A moment later, Justin walked out of the storm.

"There you are," she said, throwing her arms around his neck. "I thought I had lost you."

"You'll never lose me, Kathleen."

It was that voice again, the one she had heard before.

Kathleen pulled back and looked at Justin's face. He smiled and she began to feel better. But then his expression changed. His face changed. It wasn't his face anymore. It was the face of the thing that had been calling to her all along.

Evil poured out of its eyes and filled Kathleen with a horror that almost stopped her heart on the spot.

She screamed and ran off into the white forest.

“Come back, Kathleen. Come back.”

A minute later Kathleen ran into a tree. But when she looked up through the dying light she saw that it wasn't a tree. It was Justin.

“Justin,” she cried. “Oh, Justin. Is it really you?”

“I’m afraid Justin’s not here anymore, Kathleen.”

The blizzard raged on, turning the last of the world white, and Kathleen found herself alone in the woods with the—

AAAAH!



I'm Dreaming of a Red Christmas

They could hear the noise that passed for Christmas music these days coming from the mall across the street.

"I miss the old songs," Perry said.

"Well, they still do the old songs," Bing said. "Problem is they butcher them so bad you can't recognize them. Might as well be singing songs about serial killers."

"Or abusive fathers," Frank said.

"You guys are taking this too seriously," Dean said.

"I think they're right," Frank said. "I miss how it used to be."

"All right," Bing said. "What are we gonna do about it?"

"Let's get back out there and show them how it's done," Perry said.

"I'm in on that," Frank said. "Shoobedoobedoo. Plus I wouldn't mind ripping the head off one of those wannabes."

"Me, too," Dean said.

"I thought you said we were taking this too seriously?" Bing said.

"You are. But the worms must have eaten your brain if you think I'm gonna pass up a chance to sing again."

"As a matter of fact," Bing said, pulling a long worm out of his eye socket.

Most people rushed by but some stopped to stare. Some among the little crowd must have thought it was some promotional gimmick the mall was trying out to attract younger shoppers. "A Zombie Christmas" or something.

It was true the flesh was dropping off of them. Perry looked the same. (He always did resemble a corpse.) But there was a hole in Bing's throat where his rotting larynx showed through. Frank's lungs were black and bluer than his eyes used to be. And what was left of Dino's liver was oozing onto the floor.

Still, the four singers *killed* it. Dead and decomposed, they still sounded a hundred times better than any of the current stuff.

"What now?" Perry said after their forth encore.

"Now," Frank said, cracking his knuckles. "Now we go after Bieber."



Krampus

St. Nick was worn out. Kids had lost all respect. Most of them were nothing more than lowlife punks. The not so jolly one woke up one morning and realized that he was partly responsible. He had lowered his standards. It had happened slowly, a little more each year, until these days you couldn't tell *naughty* and *nice* apart with a DNA test.

"Look at this list," he said to Mrs. Nick during breakfast. "Sweet Samantha here shaved off her brother's hair while he slept and tried to burn down the house. And you know what I'm doing? I'm bringing her a pony. A real pony. Here's another one. Little Donovan stopped taking his medication and drove his teacher to a nervous breakdown. I mean, the woman tried to kill herself. I'm bringing him a *Playstation* and a rapid-fire paint ball machine gun."

"What can you do, papa?" the old woman said. "It's the way of the world."

"Well, I've had it. I'm calling in an old friend. I should have never listened to those politically correct weasels when they pressured me into sending him into retirement."

"You don't mean—"

"That's exactly who I mean," St. Nick said, the light returning to his black eyes.

"Krampus?" St. Nick said into the phone. "How are things down there? How have you been?"

"You know, keeping it real. What's up, Daddy Noel?"

"Well, I was hoping you were free this Christmas. I could use your skills. Things have kind of gone to hell up here. No offense."

"None taken," Krampus said. "I'm your mon. Your *de-mon*."

Evil laughter rumbled deep inside the earth. St. Nick could feel the icecap shake and crack under his boots.

St. Nick sent out a press release in late September.

"Naughty ones will get nothing—or worse," it stated. "So be good, for goodness sake. And no staying up late to watch me come down the chimney. I mean it."

The children ignored the letter, laughed, or just shook their heads.

"*Naughty*, what's that?" a lot of them said. "Whatever. Just make sure you bring me lots of presents!"

"Ready?" St. Nick said when he saw Krampus on Christmas Eve. "Say, you look a little out of shape, my friend. Good thing we don't have far to go this year."

"Hello, boss," the horned demon said, patting his beer belly. "Is that you calling the kettle black?"

"I suppose it is," Santa said, laughing and rubbing his humongous, jiggling gut.

They each had a sack. The one Krampus held in his sharp, black claws was empty. St. Nick's contained a few, small presents.

The reindeer groaned when the two old and large friends boarded the sled.

"I don't want to hear it up there," St. Nick said, pointing a finger at his flight crew. "Just be grateful we have a very short list this year. Make sure you're on it. First stop: Little Cindy Lou's house."

He took out a post-it note from his pocket and handed it up to Rudolph. The red-nosed one pointed them in the direction of Lincoln, Nebraska.

After a few stops, the sled parked in front of the last house on the list.

"Donavan Harper?" St. Nick said. "I was sure I had crossed him off the list."

"You want I should pay him a visit?" Krampus said, smiling.

"No, we're here. Might as well drop these things off," the old man sighed. "Along with a little forgiveness."

"Ouch," the demon shrieked. "You know how much that word hurts my ears."

"Sorry, Kramps," St. Nick said, heading toward the chimney. "I forgot. Stay alert out here. I might need you after all."

The old man stuffed himself down the chimney.

When he made it down to the fireplace, he looked around. There were no cookies. No milk. Just a boy playing a video game.

"You must be Donovan," St. Nick said. "You're supposed to be sleeping."

"Whatever," the boy said. "What'd you bring me, old fool? I hope it's what I asked for."

"Asked for?" St. Nick said, his face turning red. "Well, if you didn't ask for it before, you have now."

He then put his fingers in his mouth and whistled.

"Did you hear that?" Krampus said, running toward the house. "Duty calls."

"Don't forget your sack," Prancer said. "You might need it."

"I must be out of practice. Thanks."

Suddenly flames shot out of the fireplace and a rotten egg smell filled the room. Heavy, rusty chains rattled and baleful-sounding bells rung. When the smoke cleared, Krampus was standing between Donovan and the TV.

"There's someone you need to meet, Donovan," St. Nick said.

"Get the hell out of the way!" Donovan shouted. "I'm about to win."

"Oh, you already have," Krampus whispered. "You've just won a one-way trip to—how did you know?—*HELL*."

He reached out and gently sunk his claws into Donovan's ear. Then he helped him into the sack and cinched it tight.

"Wait, I'll be good!" Donovan wailed, aware too late that this wasn't a video game. "I'll be good. I promise!"

"What's he saying?" Krampus said. "I can't hear him."

"I think he said, 'Good, don't be late,'" St. Nick said. "Well, I hope we can do it again next year."

"For sure," Krampus said.

"Ho, ho, ho then," St. Nick said crawling up the chimney. "And Merry Christmas!"

Donovan was still squirming and screaming inside the sack.

"Shhh, you'll wake the dead," the demon said. "And remember, you might feel a little warm at first—that's to be expected—but you'll get used to it. Believe me, you'll get used to it."

The chimney crumbled with his laughter as Krampus and his crying cargo disappeared down into the floor.



Black Friday

When Black Friday came around, Fred was ready. He pored over the ads and prioritized the best deals. Then he entered the store addresses into his GPS. He didn't even have Thanksgiving dinner. He wanted to be light on his feet.

Some of the stores were opening at midnight, so he decided to take a long afternoon nap and then just stay up.

He had his pregame meal at a 24-hour pancake place. Then he drove over to the first store and walked up to get his priority number. After that he went back to his car to wait. He fingered the steering wheel nervously.

"Let's do this," he said at exactly 11:52, putting on his gloves.

When the doors opened he shot down to the electronic department. 3D HDTV. Check. Home Theater system. Check. Laptop. Check.

Then he hit the second store. It was understandably crowded already, having been open for more than half an hour now, and he had to use a little muscle.

It became necessary to push a few people out of the way. But he didn't hurt anyone. (That kid was just a big baby, crying like that. It was just a nudge for Christ's sake.)

Not very in keeping with the Christmas spirit. But that was all made up anyway, Fred reasoned. There's no such thing out here. It's a jungle out here. It's survival of the fittest.

"If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen," he said out loud and smiled. "Smells like the bathroom is the place for you anyway. Check yourself. I think you had an accident."

He laughed.

Digital camera. Check. Smartphone. Check. Video games. Check.

"I'll take that last donut maker," he said, hip-checking an older woman out of the way.

"Why, I never," the woman said.

"Ah, don't sell yourself short, grandma," Fred said. "I bet you did back in the day. You probably just forgot."

By the time the woman found the store manager to complain, Fred had checked two other stores off his list.

He was still laughing over the donut maker.

"What the hell do I need a donut maker for?" Fred said, driving home from the last store as the sun came up. "Oh, well. I suppose it was a good deal."

It took four trips to bring everything inside the house. He sat down, surrounded by all the things he had bought, and smiled.

"I nailed it," he said and yawned. "I really nailed it."

A minute later he crawled into bed.

"Well done, Fred," a voice suddenly said. "You're an inspiration."

"Hmmm?" Fred said. "Who's there?"

"I am the Spirit of Christmas. The true Spirit of Christmas. The real deal. Not some fake ideal. I do the crime. I do no time. I drip with slime. And I can rhyme. I am ghastly and greedy and gluttonous and gangrenous. And that's just the Gs."

Suddenly Fred was fully awake, as if he had coffee running through his veins instead of blood, and he was scared out of his mind.

"I'll change," he pleaded. "I promise."

“Why would you say such a thing? Not even in jest. I like you just the way you are. You see, I feast off of people like you. You are my turkey, ham, and Christmas goose all wrapped into one. Your dark spirit makes my mouth water.”

Fred couldn't see anything, but was certain the thing was very close.

“I'll start with something I doubt you'll even miss,” the voice whispered in his ear. “Your tiny, black heart.”

Fred felt the darkness rip into his chest. He began to scream. It did no good.



The Ghosts of Geese Deceased

The city of Bent, Oregon had decided to get rid of its geese problem by getting rid of its geese.

“These foul and filthy fowl crap up to 10 times an hour,” the mayor said. “That can add up to a pound of the stuff a day coming out of each bird. If we’re talking 100 birds, that’s 100 pounds a day. That’s 36,500 pounds a year. That’s more than a turd, I mean a third, of a hundred-thousand pounds!”

Guarded laughter and uptight chuckles filled the room.

“But seriously, we’re being buried alive, people. Something’s got to be done.”

The town council members furrowed their brows at one another and nodded.

“I move that we take the necessary steps to end this problem here and now,” the mayor said.

The council agreed and quickly voted to start by killing more than 100 of the geese living at the largest downtown river park. The meat would be used to feed the poor.

There were few protests—people seemed too busy with their holiday preparations—and the geese were gassed the following week.

For the first time since anyone could remember, the park was clean. People could actually see the cement on the walkways and didn’t have to watch where they stepped. And it was strangely quiet. Not as much as a honk. Not even a hiss. An eerie silence hung over the water.

The days quickly passed by and people gave the dead geese less and less thought. But then an odd sound filled the sky on Christmas Eve. As people looked up at the twilight they couldn’t see anything. But the honking was there just the same. It sounded as if hundreds and hundreds of geese were flying overhead.

“Little late to be flying south for the winter,” an old man said, scratching his head.

The next morning, the entire city of Bent, Oregon had disappeared. Gone. Vanished.

At first experts speculated that the town had been buried by a giant mudslide caused by recent heavy rains. A few others suggested that it was ash and lava from a nearby volcano that was responsible.

But as the first rescuers arrived, they discovered that the town wasn’t covered in mud or volcanic ash or lava. The city of Bent, Oregon had been buried under hundreds of feet and millions of pounds of *goose droppings*.

Through the Eyes of Molly McCorkle

Molly McCorkle knew she should feel grateful to be working at Jaycee's Department Store.

Things were ugly out in the job market. She had been looking for a job for more than four months with no luck. It was just for the Christmas season, but one month of work was better than none.

Molly knew she should be happy, but she couldn't help it. Something about the place made her skin crawl.

It wasn't the customers. And it wasn't the actual work either. The job wasn't all that exciting, but Molly had had worse.

No. What creeped Molly out about Jaycee's Department Store were her co-workers.

There was something about them that just wasn't... normal.

None of them ever smiled. None of them ever laughed. Everything that came out of their mouths was like something straight out of the training videos that they had forced Molly to watch her first day on the job.

"What can I help you find today, sir?"

"Did you know about our discount credit card?"

"Can I wrap that for you?"

The other creepy thing was that Molly's co-workers would come into the store on their days off. It was like they couldn't get enough of the place. They'd come in, and just wander the aisles, taking notes about the new inventory.

One time Molly was stocking boxes in the backroom with Sandy, an old-timer who had been with the store since before Molly was born.

Molly tried to make some small talk with Sandy about her life. Was she married? Did she have any kids? What were her plans for the holidays?

Sandy responded to every question with the same answer: "I love my work."

The way she said it gave Molly the chills.

It was as if she was a robot. As if she had no soul.

During her last week in January Molly caught a break. She was assigned the night shift.

There were fewer customers at these hours, which meant fewer employees. Molly would be working alone in the home section.

On her first night things went by quickly, but the hours eventually started to drag like a dead body. At one point it got so slow that Molly thought of just leaving. But that would surely get her fired. She needed this job and there was still a chance she might get hired on permanently.

She took a deep breath and pulled out a crossword puzzle.

A few minutes later Molly heard a loud noise. She got out of her chair and took a look around.

The aisles were empty. There didn't seem to be another soul in the entire store. There didn't seem to be any robots either. She couldn't see anything that would have made that noise.

There it was again. The same noise. But louder this time.

It had come from the storage room.

Molly walked up to the door and nervously tapped in the door's key code. She pulled on the handle.

The room was dark. She flipped on the light switch and went inside. Everything seemed to be in order.

But then Molly saw it. There was something shiny gleaming in the middle of the cold concrete floor. She went over and picked it up.

It was a nametag.

Molly was written on it.

Only permanent employees had nametags. Molly didn't think there was anyone else at the store with that name.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about an opening for a permanent job here at Jaycee's," a dark voice suddenly said from behind her. "We'd love for you to join us."

Molly turned around and found Sandy standing there.

But there was something different about Sandy. Something *wrong*.

Her eyes were just two black, empty holes in her head.

"Join us."

The rest of Molly's co-workers were there, too, suddenly surrounding her on all sides.

All of them had empty holes where their eyes should be.

"Join us."

Molly screamed and tried to make a run for the door. But the way was blocked. How could this be happening? What on earth had happened to their eyes!

"This won't hurt a bit," Sandy said.

She then grabbed her head and pressed her thumbs into Molly's eyeballs.

Molly screamed and screamed.

And then the world went black.

Shauna knew she should be happy to be working in the home department of Jaycee's for the holiday season. Especially since jobs were so hard to find that year.

But there was something weird about the Jaycee's home department. Something really weird.

The other employees.

They never smiled. Never laughed. Always said weird things. Acted like they were robots or something.

One day Shauna was helping stack boxes in the storage room with an old-timer named Molly. Shauna tried to ask Molly questions about her life. How long she'd been working at the store. If she had a family. What her plans were for the holidays. What she did for fun.

Molly responded to every question with the same answer: "I love my work."

"I love my work."

"I love my work."

"I love my work."



The Twelve Days of Christmas

On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the second day of Christmas my true love gave to me two sleeping pills and a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the third day of Christmas my true love gave to me three pounds of decaffeinated coffee, two sleeping pills, and a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the fourth day of Christmas my true love gave to me four blackout curtains, three pounds of decaffeinated coffee, two sleeping pills, and a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the fifth day of Christmas my true love gave to me five boxes of bubble bath, four blackout curtains, three pounds of decaffeinated coffee, two sleeping pills, and a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the sixth day of Christmas my true love gave to me six white noise machines, five boxes of bubble bath, four blackout curtains, three pounds of decaffeinated coffee, two sleeping pills, and a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the seventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me seven silk eye masks, six white noise machines, five boxes of bubble bath, four blackout curtains, three pounds of decaffeinated coffee, two sleeping pills, and a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the eighth day of Christmas my true love gave to me eight sets of earplugs, seven silk eye masks, six white noise machines, five boxes of bubble bath, four blackout curtains, three pounds of decaffeinated coffee, two sleeping pills, and a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the ninth day of Christmas my true love gave to me nine mugs of warm milk, eight sets of earplugs, seven silk eye masks, six white noise machines, five boxes of bubble bath, four blackout curtains, three pounds of decaffeinated coffee, two sleeping pills, and a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the tenth day of Christmas my true love gave to me ten noise cancelling headphones, nine mugs of warm milk, eight sets of earplugs, seven silk eye masks, six white noise machines, five boxes of bubble bath, four blackout curtains, three pounds of decaffeinated coffee, two sleeping pills, and a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the eleventh day of Christmas my true love gave to me eleven soothing music CDs, ten noise cancelling headphones, nine mugs of warm milk, eight sets of earplugs, seven silk eye masks, six white noise machines, five boxes of bubble bath, four blackout curtains, three pounds of decaffeinated coffee, two sleeping pills, and a memory foam pillow.

But I still couldn't sleep.

On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me twelve kicks to the head and... and she returned the rest of the stuff to the mall and got her money back.

I was now dead. (The eighth blow did the trick.)

But my ghost still couldn't sleep.

Uncharted Terror-tory

The doorbell rang. David ran to answer it. He saw the delivery man getting back in his truck.

There was a long tube on the doormat addressed to his neighbor, Professor W.R. Shavis.

“Wait!” David called as the truck took off down the street. “Wrong house, idiot.”

David didn’t like the old archeology professor who lived next door ever since that time he had caught David throwing rocks at a cat. (David didn’t like cats either.)

“Cats are special creatures,” Shavis had said. “You must always hold them in the highest regard.”

“Highest *retard*,” David had mumbled under his breath.

“I wonder what it is,” he now said, walking back inside. “I’ll open it later and see if it’s anything good. If it’s not, then maybe I’ll take it over to that old sh—”

A strong gust of wind suddenly slammed the door shut and knocked the tube out of his hands. The lid popped off.

“Like I always say, no time like the present,” David said. “Speaking of, maybe I’ll consider this the professor’s Christmas present to me for having to live next to him.”

He pulled out a rolled up piece of parchment and spread it out on the floor. It was a map. David studied it for a while. It seemed to be an old map of the area back when there were just a few houses here and there. It was very faded and hard to read.

“Boring,” he sighed. “It would figure.”

The doorbell rang again.

David stuffed the map back in the tube.

“If it’s that delivery idiot, I’ll just say I didn’t see that it was addressed to someone else.”

It was his friend.

“Hey, Todd.”

“Hey, Dave. What do you have there?”

“Oh, it’s just some stupid, old map.”

“Can I see?”

“Yeah, why not. Have at it.”

Todd eyed the map in silence for a few minutes.

“Pretty cool,” he finally said.

“What’s cool about it?” David asked.

“Well, it’s so old, it feels like it could just disappear in your fingers. And this X is kind of intriguing, wouldn’t you say?”

“What X?” David said.

“Here, didn’t you see it?” Todd said.

David came over and looked at the map again.

There was an X there at the edge of a large wooded area. David could have sworn that it hadn’t been there before. And he suddenly felt an excitement, as if the map were talking to him, which also hadn’t been there just a few minutes earlier.

“Hey, maybe this is a treasure map,” he said.

“I don’t know about that,” Todd said. “I mean, that’s kind of a leap. It’s just an X with no other explanation.”

“Don’t you see? That’s exactly how a treasure map would look. It wouldn’t say, ‘X marks the spot where the treasure is buried.’ In case it fell into the wrong hands.”

"I suppose. Still."

David heard his mom's car pull up. He quickly rolled up the map, put it back inside the tube, and shoved it behind the sofa. Later, he took it up to his room.

"I've been doing some research," Todd said the next day. "It seems that during the Wild West some outlaws had hideouts in these hills. It's only logical that they might have buried some bank robbery fortune and never got the chance to dig it back up."

"Now you're talking," David said.

"But we still have a problem," Todd said.

"What's that?"

"Well, the map is really sketchy on details. I mean, that X could be just about anywhere."

"Yeah, you're right."

David reached under his bed and pulled out the map.

They both looked at it and their jaws dropped open.

"Wait a minute," Todd said. "Did you do that?"

"I swear I didn't touch it since we looked at it yesterday."

"That building wasn't there yesterday. Neither were all these streets."

The area near the X was now well defined. The spot was in the trees about halfway between the library and Reynolds Avenue.

"Looks like it's about 100 feet from the library parking lot," Todd said.

"This is incredible," David said. "It's like the treasure wants us to find it."

"Yeah, but we've got another problem. The forecast calls for a foot of snow starting tomorrow night."

"If we don't dig that treasure up before then, we'll probably have to wait till spring. The library closes early tomorrow afternoon. Let's go then."

"But tomorrow's Christmas Eve."

"I know. But we'll dig fast and be home—with the treasure—before dinner."

Todd nodded.

"Where you boys going with those shovels?" Professor Shavis shouted to them the next afternoon.

"Keep walking," David said to Todd.

It was already snowing when they reached the woods behind the library.

They tried to match up the map to the shadowy world around them.

"This isn't going to be as easy as I thought," Todd said, pointing his flashlight in all directions. "It could be anywhere around here."

"I know," David said, disappointed. "We should have scouted it out in the daylight. Everything looks the same in the dark."

That's when he heard it.

It sounded like a voice, calling to him.

"*Down here,*" it whispered. "*Dig here.*"

"Did you hear that?" David said.

Todd nodded, his eyes bulging like a fat man's stomach after Thanksgiving dinner.

"Down here."

There was a faint glow coming from the ground at their feet.

Without saying a word, they started digging.

The glow became stronger the deeper they dug. The snow was coming down harder now and sticking.

Then about two feet down David's shovel hit something hard.

"This must be it!" he shouted.

They got down on their knees and used their hands to scrape the dirt off a large iron chest. There was a rusty lock on it that fell away after a couple of whacks from Todd's shovel.

They leaned down into the shallow pit and lifted the heavy lid together.

David and Todd both fell over backwards when they saw what was inside the chest. It was a large skeleton, curled up like a baby. And it was glowing brightly.

As they looked on in horror, the bones suddenly started to rise up. A moment later a ghostly cowboy was standing over them. It still had its boots on. In its bony hand was a ten-gallon hat. There was a bullet hole above the left eye and the back of its head was missing.

"Greed was the end of me," it said, pointing at David. "And greed will be the end of you."

"Git, boy," it then said, looking at Todd. "Git!"

Todd scrambled to his feet and disappeared into the snowy night.

"You've still got some baby fat on you," the ghost said, pulling David down inside the chest with him. "The worms are gonna like that."

Terrible laughter mixed with David's screams and echoed through the forest as the lid slammed shut. And then all was quiet. The snow continued to fall. The dirt drifted back over the grave.

Over to the side, the old map flapped in the breeze and now showed two small crosses where the X used to be. A moment later it turned to dust and blew away into the silent night.



A Dr. Phibes Christmas

He speaks through a hole in his neck. (Don't trip over the speaker wire.) He plays Christmas music on his organ. He's one of the world's best.

He sings a cheery little number.

"Vincent Price is dead.

His corpse is waiting for you

and you

and you.

And you.

Under your bed.

Nine times nine is nine times nine.

Can't do the math?

No use cryin.'

We're all dyin.'"

He dons his wig and best prosthetic ears. Vulnavia's not the same since her acid shower.

His gray skin glows in the colored lights. There are no presents under the tree. Except for one.

Look, it has your name on it.

I don't think he'd mind if you opened it. Go ahead.

Oops, I hope I didn't give it away.

Here, I'll help you.

Why, it's a head. No, it can't be. It's your head.

But how could that be?

How can your head be in the box and on top of your neck at the same ti—?

Oh, I see.

I see.

Now that's what I call abominable.



The Opposite of Jolly

The big man came down the chimney. Actually it wasn't a real chimney. It was a gas fireplace vent. And the big man didn't make it all the way down. He got stuck halfway. He had wedged himself in there tightly and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't pry himself free. He sweated and cursed and wondered what he had been thinking. He whistled and called to his reindeer but they didn't come. Finally, he reached into the bag and pulled out a present.

"Sorry, Bobby," he sighed. "I need this more than you do right now."

He tore off the wrapping paper, opened the box, and pulled out a small pocket knife.

"This is really going to hurt," he said.

Then he proceeded to start trimming. First a little skin. Then some flesh. Then more flesh. Then a lot of flesh. Down to the bone in places.

He finally felt a little space open up between him and the vent walls and he started sliding down toward the fire place.

The cookies and milk were waiting for him.

"I don't think so," he growled.

He stumbled into the bedrooms and dragged the kids into the living room.

Little Mary screamed when she saw the skinny, skinless man with the big white beard covered in blood.

"Santa?" she cried.

"Santa's not here anymore, Mary," he said.

Then he shoved the children up into the vent. He placed their presents in the fireplace and lit them on fire.

"There's nothing like a real, old-fashioned fire," he said. "And there's nothing like the taste of smoked children. Ho, ho, ho."



What Would Christmas Be?

What would Christmas be without an evil clown?

Lucky for you, you'll never find out.

[Insert circus music, mad laughter, and gruesome death by evil clown here.]

Winter Nightmares

The following stories were ghoulishly scavenged from the first six volumes of *They're Coming For You: Scary Stories that Scream to be Read*.

There's an icy, my-blood-runs-cold chill running through them. Bundle up, if you think it'll help.

BAD snOMEN

“A snowman doesn’t have blood coming out of its eyes,” Mr. White had said with disgust in his voice. “What were you thinking?”

Having recently arrived from Panama, what 7-year-old Carlos was thinking was that he had never seen snow, let alone a snowman. He was also wondering why he had to stay in at recess to write a letter of apology for drawing a green-haired, red-eyed snowman. But his mother had said to listen to the teacher, so the young boy didn’t complain and wrote his little letter as best he could.

“mi sorry mi make A BAD snOMEN,” it said. “it NO will hapen aGen nOw.”

Mr. White threw the letter down on his desk and shook his head. At least it was Friday, he thought.

That day was the last time anyone at the school saw Mr. White. Over the weekend there was a horrible skiing accident. Going full speed, Mr. White flew over a hill and crashed almost halfway up a tree. Branches as sharp as knives punctured both eyes, killing him instantly.

Early Monday morning a scream came from Mr. White’s empty room. The other teachers found the principal passed out on the floor by the teacher’s desk. In one hand she held the drawing. In the other, the little boy’s warning.

Red Barn

There was something wrong with the red barn.

Mary had felt it the first day her family moved into the large house on 10 acres in the country. The barn was the first thing she saw as the moving truck pulled up, and she felt the wrongness of it deep down inside.

It was old and had been left out in the rain too long, mold covering as much of it as the fading, red paint. But it wasn't the exterior that troubled Mary. There was something in its bones that wasn't right, something that could not be explained away as just a bad case of the creeps.

Mary stayed as far away from it as possible.

And then came the winter.

Even in summer the house had been chilly for most of the day, but now it was downright cold around the clock. The old heating system couldn't keep up with the dropping temperature.

"We can't go on like this," Mary's mom said one night in December. "It's freezing in here."

When Mary got home from school the next day, she saw her father swinging an ax in front of a large pile of wood outside the red barn.

"I repaired that old wood stove today," he said as he brought the ax down. "Could use your help stacking this in the barn, Mare."

Mary felt her heart start playing hopscotch inside her chest at the thought of going into the old barn. But she reminded herself that her father was right there, a few feet away. What could happen?

She got some gloves from the house and began picking up pieces of splintered wood. She focused on the work and the sound of the ax outside, trying not to think about where she was.

"This isn't so bad," she told herself as she got into the rhythm of her task.

But every once in a while, it hit her. The dark evil of the place was there, all around her. Waiting. Waiting.

It was cold in the barn, cold enough that she could see her breath, but by the time she finished Mary was hot and sweaty.

She let out a long sigh.

"All done, Dad."

That night the house was nice and warm. Everyone was in a good mood.

Mary was filled with relief at having the wood stacking behind her. There'd be no reason now for her to have to go back inside the barn for a long time, and that made her happy.

But a few nights later, all that changed.

"My back's killing me, Mare," her dad said. "You think you could bring in some wood from the barn?"

Mary shuddered at the thought of going down to that sinister barn at this hour of the night. She slowly pulled on her boots and gloves.

It was cold and clear outside, but Mary didn't look up at the stars. She kept her head down, focusing on the small bit of ground illuminated by her flashlight. She could feel the barn out there, watching and waiting. Waiting for her.

It took all of Mary's courage to open the heavy, wooden door and step inside. It was even colder in the barn than it was outside. Mary's heart beat uncontrollably as she scanned the floor for the woodpile. When she found it, she put down the flashlight and quickly began picking up pieces.

Suddenly a loud creaking sound came from the wooden loft above her head. Something was up there. Mary wasn't going to stick around to find out what. Cradling a few pieces of wood to her chest, she ran out and up the dirt driveway back to the house.

Breathing hard, she put down the pile of wood near the stove.

"One more trip should do it," her dad said.

The words screamed inside Mary's mind.

ONE MORE TRIP!

"Can't this get us through the night?" she said, almost crying. "It's so creepy out there."

"Oh, Mary, there's nothing to worry about," her mom said. "The night's just playing tricks on you."

"Besides, it's good to face your fears," her dad said. "Get back out there, young lady, and face your fears."

A second later her parents were laughing at something on TV.

Mary went back out and then remembered she had forgotten the flashlight.

"That was stupid," she said, mad at herself and her parents.

She could see the small light in the barn in the distance. She forced her legs to move quickly down the dark path.

"Face your fears," Mary mouthed as she walked. "Face your fears."

As she reached the barn, the light went out. Mary took a deep, shaky breath and went inside. She felt around on the ground for the flashlight. After several seconds that seemed like minutes, she found it and gave it a shake.

The light flickered back on. But Mary's sigh of relief died in her throat as she looked down at the ground in front of her. Her mouth hung open and her eyes widened with terror.

The once neatly stacked woodpile was now scattered all over the floor. It took Mary a few moments to realize that the pieces were arranged in crude letters. Letters that spelled out...

FACE
YOUR
FEARS

Then the flashlight went out again and the door slammed shut.

"Have you come to face me, Mary?" a voice whispered in Mary's ear. "Have you come to face your fears?"

It was the voice of the thing she had felt and dreaded all along. It was the voice of the evil that haunted the place. A pure evil that now reached out its fingers for her from the darkest depths of the barn.

Mary stumbled forward and somehow managed to open the door. She ran toward the house screaming.

Behind her the red barn shook with wicked, unspeakable laughter.

Mary ran screaming.

She couldn't stop screaming.

A Brown Christmas

"In Barcelona, where I come from, during Christmastime we have something called the Log of Poop," Cesc said. "Every night we feed it and cover it with a blanket. Then one day, when it is time, we throw it in the fire or sometimes simply hit it, and sing to it, and it poops out little candies and presents. We share the treats. Everyone is happy."

All was quiet for a moment, and then the class erupted in laughter.

"Now that's a very interesting tradition, Cesc," Mrs. Morris said, trying to regain control. "Thank you for sharing."

"But I'm not finished," Cesc said. "I haven't told you about the pooping statues. They are very popular."

"Maybe some other time," the teacher said quickly. "It's math time."

"That story makes me want to go to the bathroom," Marvin said.

"Can I go lie down, Mrs. Morris?" Donny said. "I'm pooped."

The class kept laughing.

"That's enough, class," Mrs. Morris said.

"Mrs. Morris, can I sit on your stool?" Alfred asked.

"That's it," the teacher said. "Alfred, you just lost your recess."

Alfred watched the other kids playing outside through the window. He tapped the desk angrily with his pencil.

"I'm gonna get that crappy Cesc," he said under his breath. "I'll fix him good."

After school Alfred took the long way home. He stopped in front of Cesc's house and stared. There it was out on the porch—a log with a big red happy face painted on it, covered with a blanket.

"Man, that's so stupid," he said.

He walked up quietly, making sure no one was around. Then he unzipped his backpack and placed the log inside.

When he reached the highest part of the bridge that crossed the Cornpone River, he threw the log over the side. He watched it splash and then sink under the surface. A few moments later it popped back up and floated downstream.

"Mr. Poop go bye-bye," Alfred said and laughed.

The next day Cesc looked sad.

"Hey, what's the matter, Cesc?" Alfred said after school. "You look like somebody peed all over poop log."

"As the matter of some fact..."

"Sorry, I don't have time to stand around and shoot the, uh, breeze," Alfred said. "I'm late for football practice."

"My favorite football player is Carles Puyol," Cesc called out.

"Isn't he a baseball player?" Alfred said. "Never mind, whatever."

It was dark by the time Alfred got home. His mom left him a note reminding him to take a shower and that dinner was in the fridge.

He went upstairs and took off his cleats and pads. A ghastly smell swirled around him. He sniffed his shoes and then under his arm.

"That is ripe right there, son," Alfred said. "I guess I do need a shower."

He stepped into the bathroom and turned on the light.

Something was written in brown crayon on the mirror.

“Alfred go bye-bye,” it read.

Alfred reached out and touched the letters with his fingers. It wasn't crayon.

“Gross,” he said. “What's going on here?”

He started to wash his hands but stopped when he heard the door slam. The bathroom was immediately filled with a horrible smell that made Alfred gag as he tried to gasp for air. He reached for the doorknob but stopped cold.

Standing there blocking the exit was the log from Cesc's house.

It wasn't smiling anymore.

The Diary of Flem Smith

6 September, 1620... Our ship, the *Mayflower*, has set sail for America. It will be a long voyage. I do not understand why we had to leave Holland. I was born in England, but Holland is the only home I can remember. I miss Femke, my best friend. Father says the Dutch are not like us. I do not understand why that is a bad thing.

17 September... I have not vomited for two days.

22 September... A strange man from Holland is on the ship. His name is Jan Boemann. He only speaks a few words of English. He is very thin and tall. He dresses in black from head to toe except for the large white ruff around his neck. This collar is so ghastly and white, it hurts the eyes. Stranger still is that no one has seen Jan Boemann in more than a week.

30 September... People say now that Jan Boemann must have fallen overboard.

4 October... It is always night and loud down here. The wind and the waves and the coughing and the vomiting and the other body noises fill the foul air. The darkness hides the bugs in the biscuits. Nothing hides the smells. Such wretched smells.

9 October... A most heinous sailor has died. He would say awful things. Father says he was no better than the lice and fleas that crawl over our heads and bodies. Still, I am filled with sorrow at his passing.

11 October... The storms have been bad. Our tiny ship is tossed about on this great ocean. We are taking on water and there is talk we may have to turn back. I fear we may sink to the bottom of the sea.

14 October... The *Mayflower* has been repaired. The captain is confident we will reach America.

16 October... It was my turn again to go on deck and empty the bucket. It takes all of my concentration to keep the vile thing upright as the ship rocks from side to side.

19 October... One of the men fell into the sea during a storm, perhaps like Jan Boemann, but he managed to hold on to ropes and was pulled up to safety.

6 November... A servant boy died today. He is the second. Somehow, I do not think he will be the last.

9 November... Land! Land ahoy! We have reached America.

27 November... The men have been searching the coast for a place to build our new home. They have seen savages in this wild land. I wonder what new and strange animals we will encounter as well.

4 December... It is hard to see land so close and to have to stay aboard this miserable ship. Oh, to walk in those woods would be such a thing. I am not afraid of the cold or the savages. If only I knew how to swim. If only the waters were not freezing. I would do it. I would.

22 December... The men have finally found the spot. They will build the town by day and return to the ship at night. The icy sky screams with wind and snow.

29 December... John Poundstone returned today with a strange story. In the distant trees he saw a thin, tall man dressed all in black. It was Boemann, he said. It could not be. But it was. As John approached, he saw that the large ruff around his neck was now dark red in color. His eyes were also red and his teeth and fingers had grown long and pointy. Father says it is the fever talking.

1 January, 1621... John Poundstone died today. His last words: "The Boemann is coming for me."

3 January... The snow falls silently on the dark water. December took with it six souls. The new year already two. They bury the bodies on the hill.

15 January... We are finally on dry land and off that terrible ship. We all live together in a common house. It is no bigger than the Mayflower, but we are on dry land. Finally, dry land. I thought I would be happier and, yet, I am troubled. I sense a darkness I cannot explain. A darkness blacker than night.

19 January... The story of Boemann will not die. It is said now he is here with us. Some of the older children have taken to singing a song: "If the scurvy or the cold do not take you, The Boemann will."

23 January... Little Jonas Gutkind's screams filled the night. "No, don't let The Boemann take me!" It was plain to see there was no one there. But Jonas saw him just the same. His little eyes still bulged with terror after he was cold and dead.

February 28... No one is singing anymore. Fully one quarter are dead. Many more will surely follow. It is cold here. So cold.

7 March... Terrible storms with no end. The world is white and The Boemann is real. I swear it. I saw his eyes last night in the dark. I was too weak from coughing to scream. I shake from fever and see him in my sleep still.

15 March... I saw The Boemann again last night. His long fingers stretched out for me. He smiled at me with his long, sharp teeth. And then he whispered in my ear, "Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be a... AAAAH!!!"

Almost half of the 102 passengers on the Mayflower died during that first winter in America. They died of cold, hunger, and disease. It is not known how many were taken by The Boemann.

The Cold Room

The room was always cold. No matter what the temperature was outside. No matter what the thermostat said. Even in the middle of summer. Even during record-breaking heat waves. The room was always cold.

Cold, cold, cold.

There were never enough blankets. There were never enough sweaters. There were never enough parkas. The heating vents pumped in no heat. The portable heaters acted like air conditioners. There were never enough blankets. There were never enough sweaters. There were never enough parkas. The room was always cold.

It was a good place to store wine. It was a good place to preserve the dead. It was a good place to see if you were as cool as McCready. It was a good place to wait on *The Thing's* next move.

The room was always cold.

Brrr. Brrr. Brrr.

The Blue Boy

The lake was supposed to be haunted. Over the years, several people had died there under unexplained circumstances. Some had gone mad.

They said the L-shaped body of water was cursed by the ghost of a boy who had drowned while ice fishing more than 50 years earlier. It was early spring when the thin ice had cracked under his feet.

They never found the body.

"Where you headed?" the old man at the general store asked.

"Up to the lake," Mano said, signaling with his chin.

"Dead Boy Lake?"

"Yep."

"Wouldn't advise it," the man said, putting the container of worms into a brown paper bag. "It's haunted, haven't ya heard?"

"As long as it's haunted by fish," Mano said.

"I knew him. Back when he was a boy, I mean. Name was Dave. Nice kid. These days they call him *Blue Boy*. Hear he's not so nice anymore."

Mano nodded and took his worms and his change.

"Watch yourself now," the old man said, lighting a cigarette and squinting out the window.

Half an hour later Mano was sitting in his canoe, casting his line into the water. He had the place to himself.

Mano never had a better day. It was as if the trout had been waiting for him all their lives. They went for the worms like flies on molasses, impaling themselves on the hook. Mano wanted to stop—he had more fish than he could eat in a month—but he couldn't. And neither could the trout.

So there he sat, casting and reeling, casting and reeling, until his ice chest was overflowing with the flapping fish. Then the breeze started to pick up. And between the sound of his reel and the wind, Mano thought he heard something else.

"Save soooooome for meeee," a far off voice called.

Mano paid it no mind. He just kept fishing.

Finally, he decided to call it a day. He sadly placed his rod inside the canoe and paddled back to shore. He loaded the back of the SUV with his silver-scaled treasure and secured the boat to the roof. Then he slid in behind the wheel.

"Hell of a day," Mano said.

"Hell of a day," a gurgling voice repeated.

The sound was coming from the passenger seat.

A horrible stench suddenly filled the car. Mano turned slowly. Sitting there was a small boy, his skin wet and pale blue. At first he began to gasp and cough up water, and then a thick black froth bubbled from his mouth.

The boy turned toward him and Mano saw that he had no eyes—just dark empty holes that disappeared into the back of his skull. He smiled at Mano through greenish, rotting teeth.

"Thanks for saving soooooome for meeee," he murmured.

The *Blue Boy* reached out his arms and pulled Mano in.

"Now, give me soooooome," he whispered.

Then he kissed Mano on the lips. As his world went blue and black, Mano felt his heart stop. And then he felt nothing.

AAAAH!

Le Père Fouettard

“Wait for me, girl,” the voice called out. “I won’t hurt yooooooooou...”

Abby ran as fast as she could down the dark cobblestone street, but the footsteps kept getting louder and closer.

“Wait for me, girl,” the voice said again. “I won’t hurt yooooooooou...”

Abby’s heart pounded away like a mechanical monkey beating his drum.

She looked over her shoulder but still couldn’t see the figure’s face.

“Wait for me, girl. I won’t hurt yooooooooou...”

“No!” she screamed. “Nooo!”

And then she woke up.

This same dream had haunted her sleep for the last six nights. The only difference was that each time the shadow figure got closer. She had a feeling of dreadful certainty that when the thing caught up to her, she would die in the dream—and in real life.

“You look terrible,” her mom said the next morning. “Another nightmare? Maybe you can take a nap when you get home from school.”

That’s right, Abby thought. We have show-and-tell in French class today.

Abby finished her orange juice and went back to her room.

She reached up on the highest shelf and brought down the odd Santa Claus doll her dad had recently brought back from France for her.

Abby had stopped believing in old St. Nick a few years ago, but she still loved to collect the dolls.

This doll was dressed all in black with a black beard to boot. Even its eyes were completely black with no whites showing. Its expression was also dark and angry. He carried a stick and an empty sack.

Abby thought the doll was rather strange looking, but that wasn’t all that unusual. Each doll was just the artist’s interpretation. No two were alike. Most were jolly. But some looked a little scary.

When it was her turn, Abby walked up to the front of the class with the doll.

“*Bonjour*,” she said. “*Voici mon poupée de Père Noel*.”

The teacher smiled and interrupted.

“That is not Santa Claus,” she said in English with a heavy French accent. “That is *Père Fouettard*.”

Abby looked confused.

“Take a seat, *mon cher*,” the teacher said. “I can explain it to you after class.”

Later the teacher told her all about Père Fouettard. It turned out that he was Santa Claus’ assistant. His job was to punish the bad kids with his stick.

“The story has been cleaned up and made politically correct throughout the years,” the teacher said. “But it began as a typically grisly fairy tale.

“Some of the earliest accounts state that Père Fouettard was a butcher who chopped up three young boys for their money and used the meat in a stew. When Père Noel, to you Santa Claus, heard about this he brought the boys back to life and made Père Fouettard into his assistant.”

“That’s a pretty weird story,” Abby said. “I mean, *ce très bizarre*.”

On her way home it struck her that she had started having the nightmare right about the time her dad had given her the doll. She decided to put it somewhere else in the house.

She didn't want to hurt her father's feelings, so she had to think of an appropriate place for Père Fouettard. But for now he would go in the back of the coat closet by the front door.

That night, Abby looked up at her collection.

"Good night, Santas," she said, turning off the light.

She soon fell into a deep sleep.

And then the dream came back. Abby was being chased again.

"Wait for me, girl," a voice called out behind her. "I won't hurt yooooooooo..."

The dark figure was close now, closer than he had ever been. The footsteps were right behind her.

Abby felt a pain in her ankle.

A moment later she woke up screaming. Her dad rushed into the room.

"That was a bad one, huh?" he said.

"It was so real," Abby sighed. "My leg still hurts."

She pulled the covers off and saw several red welts around her ankle.

"How can that be?" Abby screamed.

Hiding under the foot of the bed, the doll smiled.

"I won't hurt you, girl," he whispered in a French accent. "Next time I'll just kill you."

AAAAH!

Room for Two More

Ted and Wendy passed through mile after mile of the most epic winter wonderland. The sky above was a brilliant blue, and the snow was not too soft and not too hard. Even Goldilocks would have said it was just right. The two snowshoers were heading toward a place on the map called *Satan's Lava Flow*.

"This is amazing but, dude, I'm so hungry I would sell my soul for a brownie," Ted said after a few hours.

Just then they saw smoke in the distance. A fire, they both thought. It would be sweet to warm themselves by a fire while they ate lunch. After a few more minutes, they came to a cabin-like shelter.

"According to the map, this isn't supposed to be here," Ted said.

"Well, I'm going in," Wendy said. "You can stay out here and eat your map."

It was dark and smoky inside. Old, rustic benches surrounded a black wood stove. When their eyes adjusted to the darkness, Wendy and Ted saw that they were not alone.

A man sat huddled in the darkest corner of the shelter. A tattered, red wool blanket pulled tightly around his head made it hard to see his face except for his hollow, tired eyes, which looked out in the distance.

Ted said hello but the man didn't answer. The man's presence seriously weirded them out, so they quickly chomped down their lunch and said good-bye. Once again the man didn't answer.

Then just as they were about to leave, he suddenly turned toward them and those dead eyes came to life with an evil, dark glow that illuminated the shelter and threw dark shadows into their souls. He seemed to speak to them without words, and the things he said filled Ted and Wendy with a cold that had nothing to do with the temperature.

They quickly put on their snowshoes and headed back into the woods. Ted turned around once and thought he saw the entire hut glowing with that horrible, dark light. Wendy could have sworn she heard terrible laughter coming from its direction. They quickly crunched through the woods in silence. Ted finally spoke.

"Man, that guy was creepy."

"No duh," Wendy said. "Did you see how he looked at us?"

The short winter day was getting shorter and a storm was moving in. Fortunately the snowshoers saw a sign that told them they were just two miles from their car.

"Almost there," Ted said.

"Almost there," Wendy said.

A dark wind began ripping through the trees, knocking down huge icicles from the branches. The sky was now the color of snow and their legs began to ache.

After an hour they came to another sign. Ted studied the sign through weary eyes and then studied it some more.

"According to this we're still two miles from the parking lot," Ted sighed. "I don't understand it."

He was sure they had made all the right turns at all the right places. A sick feeling gripped his bowels at the next intersection. There, another sign told them they were no closer to the car.

"Okay, someone's playing a joke," Wendy said. "Maybe somebody switched all the signs."

Snow began to fall sideways as Ted pulled the map and compass out of his pack.

“Forget those dumb signs,” he said in a shaky voice. “If we start heading north, we’re bound to reach the parking lot or at least the highway.”

Horror-struck, he saw the compass needle spinning madly. Round and round it went. Ted yelled and threw the compass against a nearby tree. Then, too tired to hold the anger, he dropped to his knees.

Which way was north? Everything looked the same. No landmarks. Just trees in every direction. Wendy wondered how things had turned so bad so fast. The wind was blowing harder now, the snow sticking to the trees like the fear that began to coat their insides. And it was getting cold. Very cold.

“We’ve got to s-s-start moving,” Ted said through chattering teeth. They patted each other on the shoulders the way football players do before a game.

“We can do this,” Ted said.

“We can do this!” Wendy shouted back.

An hour later the sky had disappeared behind the screaming snow and it was getting harder and harder to see. Still, with legs of lead they plowed on.

“I’m tired,” Wendy whispered a few minutes later. “So tired. Wait... Do you smell that?”

It was the strong smell of blackened wood, like a fire after the fire has gone out. Somehow the shelter must be close by, Ted thought. They could get warm and rest and get out of the storm. Through the driving snow, they could barely make out the outline of the wooden structure. The last of their energy gone, they smiled weakly at each other and shuffled toward it. Then they stopped dead in their tracks.

The man was still there. Ted saw those evil eyes, looking past the snow and the darkness, looking into him. And Wendy heard the laughter again. *That terrible laughter.*

They went inside.

[Laugh your most crazy-sounding laugh while making crazy eyes at your audience.]

Bandoneón

The call came in on the shortwave radio and confirmed their worst fear: the storm that had lasted for six days would now maroon them here for much longer.

Dr. Mary St. Clair and Dr. Paul St. Clair had been packed and all ready to go. But the husband and wife science team would be going nowhere. It was now too dangerous for a plane to come for them until the spring. They would be spending the entire winter in Antarctica.

Just last week the planes had come and gone, flying tons of gear and hundreds of people back to civilization. Back to the sun.

"Well, at least we've got plenty of food and fuel," Paul said. "And the flat screen and all those DVDs should help pass some of the time."

"Too bad our books and my sheet music were already shipped out," Mary said. "But this might give me a chance to write my own tangos."

Paul had bought her a small hand-held accordion called a *bandoneón* in Argentina on their last stop before flying down to their South Pole home. He thought learning how to play a new instrument would help to fill the long Antarctic hours. Mary had become a pretty good player in the five months they had been at the ice station.

"Maybe you can teach me how to dance," Paul said, trying to sound optimistic. "Plus maybe I'll write that novel I'm always talking about."

At first the couple made the best of the situation. They watched movies, Mary played her music, and Paul wrote.

But in under a month the TV broke and Paul developed writer's block.

Mary kept playing though. She had even written a tango she called "Pablo's Peace."

Paul liked it at first and was touched that Mary would name her first composition in his honor.

But as the weeks went by, Mary became more and more obsessed with the song. Soon it was all she would play.

Through the endless dark days and dark nights that bled into one another, Pablo's Peace began to wear on Paul.

"Mary, could you please play something else?" he would ask and then beg and then scream.

"Please, Mary. For the love of God. Please."

But the answer was always the same.

"I'm almost finished with it, dear. It'll be worth it."

Mary stopped cooking and bathing and sleeping. Her entire existence revolved around Pablo's Peace.

"For the love of God, Mary. Please stop, please," Paul would say. "Please."

"I'm almost finished with it, dear," she would answer. "It'll be worth it."

When the other scientists returned to the ice station in the spring they found Paul first.

He had killed himself with an axe.

Then they found Mary. In the freezer. She had been hacked to pieces and neatly wrapped and stored.

They also found a note.

I know you won't understand, but I had to do it. She drove me mad. With that song. That infernal song. The funny thing is that I can hear it still. Even though I made her stop yesterday.

Or was it last week? It doesn't matter. I made her stop. That's the point. Or if you're going to nitpick, all right, the axe made her stop. But I helped. And when we were through with dear, dear Mary—the axe and I—we made that bandoneón stop. Oh, we made it stop. That damned bandoneón will never play another note again. We saw to that. God will understand. He knows about such things.

Dr. Paul St. Clair

“Man, that poor bastard really went nuts out here,” the detective called in to investigate the case said. “But I guess music will get on your nerves that way I suppose.”

“To my way of thinking that's a scientific fact,” the ice station manager said. “And you could almost understand where he was coming from, except for one small detail.”

“What's that?” the detective said.

“Along with the rest of their personal belongings, that accordion he writes about was flown out on the last plane that left here back in April—*six months ago*.”

The Head of Teddy Ballgame

Josh, Jon, and John were sitting around the clubhouse playing video games and drinking beer.

"You know when the season's over, we should go on a road trip to the desert and break out Teddy Ballgame," Josh said.

"Well, the way we've been pitching that should be sooner rather than later," Jon said. "I doubt we'll make the playoffs."

Outside the crowd booed as the team lost yet another game.

"Pass me that bucket of chicken," John said, belching.

Jon was right. The team blew a nine-game lead in the final month of the season and failed to qualify for the postseason.

A week after the season ended, the three pitchers were far away from chilly Boston, playing round after round of golf under the Arizona sun and sitting around the pool.

"You ready for tomorrow night?" Jon said. "The security guard will be expecting us."

"I reckon so," Josh said. "How much is this going to cost us anyway?"

"A couple of tickets behind the first base dugout to a game next season and an all-expenses weekend trip to Beantown."

"This one's on me," John said, smiling. "After all, I made 16.5 million dead presidents last year."

"You pitch like a dead president," Josh said. "Hey, wasn't your ERA 16.5?"

"Takes one to know one," John said. "Anyway, I'll be that one you see crying... all the way to the bank."

"All right, all right," Jon said. "Tomorrow night we set Teddy Ballgame free."

Teddy Ballgame had been one of the most famous players in team history and one of the greatest hitters in the history of baseball. When he died his family had his head frozen in hopes that he could be brought back to life one day. But according to his oldest daughter, this went against his wishes. She said Teddy Ballgame just wanted to be cremated and his ashes scattered at sea.

"I'm playing a loop for the cameras," the security guard said. "But after 10 minutes I've got to go back to the live feed, so set your watches and don't be late. Oh, and you're looking for the container marked A-1949. A-1949. Got it?"

"A-1949. Got it," Jon said. "Thanks, buddy."

"It's wicked cold in hee-ah," Josh said. "Wait a minute. Why am I talking that way? I'm from Texas."

The three looked around the room. There were a few large containers that housed whole bodies. Mostly, though, it was heads. There seemed to be more than 100 corpses in all.

"Why just the heads?" John asked.

"This stuff is expensive," Jon said. "I guess most of these folks figured they'd freeze their most important part—their brains."

"I guess they won't be preserving your brain," Josh said, turning toward John. "Or your right arm."

"Shut up," John said.

“Man, that’s so wrong,” Josh said. “They’ve got his head in a lobster pot.”

John started laughing.

“Keep it down, you idiots,” Jon said.

“Look,” Josh said a few minutes later. “Here it is.”

They removed the lid from the silver canister.

John stared down at the head.

“Are you sure that’s him,” he said. “That doesn’t look like Teddy Ballgame.”

“It’s the number the guard gave us,” Jon said.

“Well, he has been dead for a while now,” Josh said. “Plus he’s frozen. I’d expect he would look a little different.”

“All right,” Jon said. “Josh, you hold the container and I’ll lift him out. John, you hold open the bowling ball bag.”

“Okay, but move it along,” John said. “We’re running out of time.”

Jon lifted the head carefully out of the container.

“We’re here to take you home, Teddy,” Josh whispered.

Suddenly the head flew out of Jon’s hands. It floated and hovered in midair and slowly opened its eyes.

“I’m not going anywhere,” the head said.

“But we came to rescue y-y-y-you,” Jon said.

“There’s nothing I’d like more than to feel myself drifting down to the Caribbean on those warm waters,” the head of Teddy Ballgame said. “But what you boys did wasn’t right. Somewhere along the line you stopped caring. You stopped caring about the game. And from where I float, that’s a mortal sin.”

“This is nuts!” John shouting, his eyes bulging like cheeky wads of tobacco.

“I’m not the only Sox fan in here either,” the head said. “We’re gonna teach you a lesson you won’t soon forget. Get ‘em, boys.”

The lids popped off a few of the other containers. Before they knew what was happening, the three ballplayers were surrounded by several frozen bodies and floating, angry heads.

“No!” Josh screamed. “Nooo!”

“This can’t be happening,” Jon yelled.

“We’re sorry,” John whimpered, a growing puddle of pee down at his feet. “We’re so sorry.”

A few minutes later they found themselves inside one of the large canisters. The frozen liquid nitrogen closed in all around.

They were colder than any of them had ever been in their entire lives. John’s lips turned purple. Josh’s eyeballs froze. Jon’s brain cracked and popped.

“Three hundred and twenty-one degrees below zero is no laughing matter,” the head of Teddy Ballgame said, chuckling. “Oh, wait, maybe it is. Hahahahaa... Maybe it is.”

Wendigo Psychosis

It was a beautiful day. The snow that had been falling steadily for two weeks had finally stopped, making way for an icy blue sky. The mountains that surrounded the small Wyoming town looked bodacious.

Josh wished he could get up there. As he started driving toward his high school, he was thinking about cross-country skiing and decided to just turn around. With his skis already in the car, it was just a matter of navigating up the slick, winding roads.

He arrived at the trailhead and parked. It wasn't surprising to find that he was the only one there. He checked the backpack that was always stored in the Jeep and found plenty of water and snacks. His plan was to go out for just an hour or two, then maybe head back to catch his afternoon classes.

The trail wound through a dense forest of pine trees. Everything was plastered with thick white snow. He was happy to see that he was the first and only skier on the trail. He was making new tracks, which meant he wasn't going to be able to go very fast.

After about an hour, Josh stopped to take some pictures. He unzipped his backpack and looked around. That's when he noticed it. A little way down from where he stood were fresh footprints alongside his ski tracks, as if somebody were following him.

"This can't be," he said.

He hadn't seen anybody and there had been no other cars in the lot.

He took a few pictures and started up again.

In a little while he stopped and again found footprints behind him, right beside his tracks.

"What in the Devil is going on?" he whispered.

Nobody was around for miles. In fact, he hadn't seen another person, bird, or animal the entire morning.

He stared at them and to his horror, he actually saw footprints being formed right in front of his eyes, heading closer!

Josh started skiing harder, now sure that somebody or something was stalking him. He could almost feel eyes on his back, but he had no logical explanation for what it was.

When he stopped to catch his breath, he dreaded looking back. But he did. And again there were footprints, coming up the ridge toward him. A chill shot through his body.

Something was really there! Something he couldn't see.

"Who's there?" he shouted.

Only his echo answered back.

Josh ended up going much farther than he originally planned. He looked at his watch.

"I've got to turn around if I want to get back before dark," he said.

He took off. There was nothing to do but ski back toward whatever was headed his way.

Jeremiah Smith was having a terrible month. The winter had been difficult, so very difficult. Recent storms had dumped at least two feet of snow, which made trapping and hunting down right impossible.

As he stepped out of his shelter, his stomach growled. He was starving and weak, but was happy to finally see a blue sky. He put on his buckskin coat and coonskin hat. Although it had stopped snowing, it was extremely cold.

His food supply was beyond running low—it was just plain out. He had finished off the leg a week ago. The leg he had cut off a dead Indian he had found.

At first the meat tasted odd but by the end, Jeremiah was sure he had never eaten anything as delicious.

Jeremiah stood by the fire, sipping the last of his coffee-flavored water. Just a hard winter, that's all. He had lived out here three years already. He would get through this. Things would turn around.

He loved the peace and serenity of the mountain man life. He recalled back to when he had first heard about men going off to the west, to live off the land and trap and hunt animals. It sounded like paradise. He had been a soldier in the Mexican American War and had been forced to do many bad things. He wanted to spend the rest of his life forever away from other men and their politics. He was never going back.

He made sure he had all his gear for a day of hunting: his Hawken rifle, Bowie knife, and powder horn. Then he walked into the woods.

When he walked over a ridge, he hesitated. Up ahead was an Indian burial ground. He didn't like to cross over such things. Bad luck. But the way he saw it, he had to search everywhere for food, even there. Besides, he thought he had seen something moving in the trees.

Jeremiah crossed the burial site as fast as he could. He would just put it out of his mind and focus on the hunt. If he had to track the beast all day, he would. He would wait and make the one shot from his Hawken's count.

For a long while he followed his prey. It was leaving strange tracks in the snow. He couldn't make out what it was. It ran like an animal but left tracks like a sled. Could have been another mountain man or Indian. At this point, he didn't care.

The prey would dart ahead, but Jeremiah was always able to catch up. After a while, he felt good about his chances. He could smell the tender meat cooking over an open fire. It made his mouth water just thinking about it. He hoped the meat would taste as sweet as that leg had.

Jeremiah stopped and took careful aim. And then the strangest thing happened. Right on top of a small hill, the beast turned and headed right toward him.

He took aim. Finally, his luck was changing.

El Cucuy de la Montaña

"I would not go that way if I were you," Victor said.

"This is the way, Vicky. I told you, I've been here before," Angel said, looking past the snow at the trail on the other side.

Stalling, Victor drank slowly from his water bottle. It was dusty and hot, even for July, on the steep path that led to the summit of Mt. Demonico. But it was not quite hot enough to melt this patch of snow.

Veronica, Victor's sister, had driven them to the trailhead and would pick them up after her shift ended.

"I'll see you two little twerps later," she said. "Don't let *El Cucuy de la Montaña* get you—and don't be late."

"Your sister is fine," Angel said after Veronica drove away, playing with his make-believe TV Zorro mustache. "But I don't care for her calling me no twerp and treating us like we was children with that trash talk about some Boogie Man of the Mountain. *Por favor.*"

Victor smiled. He knew a lot of people believed those stories about *El Cucuy de la Montaña*. And he knew Angel wasn't one of those people.

"Man, it drops a long way if we slip," Victor said now, looking at the rocky precipice. It was hundreds of feet down, maybe even a thousand. "The scavengers are gonna have one sweet dead man's party on what's left of us."

"You always show up with that fear of yours. Everywhere we go," Angel said. "C'mon now, girl, this is the way."

Victor tried to stretch out the break by talking.

"You know my uncle said he saw *El Cucuy de la Montaña* up here once when he was a kid," Victor said. "He said it looked just like a regular man but then it started to breathe out fog or something."

"Or something is right," Angel said. "Your uncle's been breathing in too much loco weed."

"All right. Time to do this."

Victor's stomach sank, the chocolate and peanuts mixing with the now fear-flavored nougat.

The boys walked up to the edge of the snow again.

Suddenly someone walked up behind them.

"Man, don't sneak up like that," Angel said, losing his balance a little.

The tall man had long hair and a beard and carried a walking stick. It was the kind that always made the boys laugh, selling for 50 bucks in town when you could find plenty of sticks in the woods for free.

"There's a better way up over here," he said.

Then he smiled, turned around, and walked away. Squinting in the fierce sun, Angel and Victor watched him leave.

"These *menso* tourists," Angel said.

"Look," Victor said, seeing his chance. "I'm gonna go check it out. I'll call out if I find it."

Angel looked down at the snow and the drop without saying anything. He shook his head as Victor headed off in the direction of the hiker.

"Yeah, okay," he said. "Might as well check it out, if it's faster and all."

Victor exhaled deeply as he heard Angel walking behind him.

The boys followed the man at a distance to where the trail veered upwards. They both realized instantly that here was the real trail.

“Hey, don’t you think it’s strange that he wasn’t carrying a pack or anything like that?” Angel said.

“Yeah, not even water,” Victor said. “Man, I’d be thirsty.”

“Maybe his people are at the top and they have his stuff.”

The stranger was already far ahead of them. Right before he disappeared from view, Victor thought he could see the man’s breath.

Must be cold up there, he thought.

The rest of the hike was easy. Soon the two boys threw up their arms on the summit in celebration as if they had conquered Everest.

“Wow, this is awesome!” Victor said.

Angel agreed, meeting his friend’s fist with his own.

They stood there for a few moments, taking in the top-of-the-world feeling and all the sights. What they didn’t see was the stranger. Somehow he wasn’t at the top.

“Weird, man,” Victor said. “Where would he go? It’s like he just vanished.”

“Yeah,” Angel said. “Weirder than your mom’s tamales.”

Victor was about to start laughing. But then he saw the stranger suddenly appear behind Angel. The man’s eyes burned red through the frosty fog that escaped from his mouth.

Before Victor could warn his friend, the man picked Angel by the shoulders and threw him off the side of the mountain.

“*¡Esta es mi montaña!*” the man said. “This is my mountain, fools!”

As it came toward Victor, *El Cucuy*—or whatever it was—seemed to create its own weather. The sun disappeared and the temperature dropped like one of those rocks trailing behind poor Angel.

Victor started running down the path as fast as he could.

It felt more and more like November with every freezing step he took. The rocks under his feet were beginning to feel slippery, but he knew he couldn’t afford to slow down. That thing was probably coming after him.

As he rounded a switchback, Victor saw the creature out of the corner of his eye. It was covered in snow and ice. Victor screamed.

“*Dios, por favor*,” he said. “Help me.”

A moment later he lost his balance and fell, hitting his head on a rock. Everything went black.

When Victor came to, it was dark. The sun had gone down and it was freezing. Angel was lying next to him.

“Angel?” Victor whispered, shaking his friend. “Angel.”

Angel was cold and stiff.

He must be dead, Victor thought.

An otherworldly cold closed in all around. Suddenly, it was the dead of winter. Victor began to shake uncontrollably. When he looked down, he saw that he was completely encased in ice. He struggled to move, but all he could do was shiver.

Before his eyeballs froze over, Victor saw *El Cucuy de la Montaña* coming toward him.

“I will feed on him first,” it growled, staring at Angel with those demon-red eyes. “And then I will come for you, *menso*. And then I will come for you...”

AAAAH!

Something in the Snow

There was something in the snow. Something alive.

It caused the snow to move and clump together in strange formations like when the cat leaves something behind in the litter box.

They looked like badly made snowmen. Three arms here. Two heads there.

And then the *snowmen* began to move. They began to move toward the house.

Closer and closer they came. Closer and closer...

The Dead Boy

"*You're home now,*" the voice said. "*Hoooooooooome.*"

At least it sounded like it could have been a voice. And if indeed it was a voice, those could have been the words it was saying. Or it could just have been like one of those EVPs they play on ghost investigation shows where whatever was recorded doesn't sound anything remotely like the subtitle at the bottom of the screen.

Either way, right now Malcolm had bigger problems.

The wind was really blowing. Whitecaps covered the water. Malcolm was glad he was close to shore. He wouldn't want to be out in the middle of the lake with this thing blowing.

He paddled over to the shore, jumped out, and dragged the kayak over the smooth rock shelf. He dug into his daypack and ripped out the map. Nothing on it matched up to real life. He had to be lost. This giant lake didn't seem to be near where he should be or thought he should be. Nowhere near. The map made no sense to him as it danced in the wind. He took out his compass and lined up north with north on the map. It still didn't add up. He had no idea where he was.

No freakin' idea.

At least the wind was good for something, Malcolm thought as he turned back toward the water. It kept away those horrible black flies and man-eating mosquitoes that had tortured him a few hours earlier.

But returning to shore, Malcolm saw that the wind was *good* for another thing, too. The kayak wasn't where he had left it. He looked both ways like a pedestrian at a crosswalk. No kayak. Then he glanced out on the whipped-up lake and saw it, about 100 feet out and getting farther away by the second. The wind must have blown it into the water.

Trying to swim after it seemed crazy. He would not catch up to it, just be lured out into the huge lake. And even if he somehow managed to reach it, how was he going to drag it back to shore in the face of such a monstrous wind?

"Now what?" Malcolm's brain screamed as the little boat got smaller and smaller. "Now what!"

He almost thought he heard that voice again, answering him somewhere beyond the wind.

"*You're home now,*" it repeated. "*Hoooooooooome.*"

The gathering clouds were getting darker by the second. Thunder was already rumbling in the distance. The sky was going to open up any moment now. Malcolm put on the cheap, paper-thin emergency poncho.

"I'm so stupid," he said, fighting back tears. "Stupid, stupid, *stuuuupid.*"

The wind grew even stronger as the first rain drops fell. They were big and fat and came at him at an angle. Malcolm backed away from the shore and took shelter under a pine tree. The water hit the lake in sheets. He couldn't see the kayak anymore. He hunkered down and wondered if he would have to spend the night out here.

Eventually, the storm began to die down. The wind turned into a light breeze and the rain became a mist. A rainbow touched down on the far end of the lake.

The yellow kayak was nowhere in sight, but the growing blue patches in the sky made Malcolm feel better.

"It's gonna be all right," he said out loud.

But first he had to go to the bathroom. He would have to use leaves since he didn't have any toilet paper. He walked deeper into the wet woods and found a sharp rock to dig a hole. A couple of minutes later, Malcolm crouched down and left his deposit.

Just then a bright flash lit up the forest. It was followed by a thunderclap that sounded like eight pianos falling off a tall building.

Malcolm started running back toward the lake, but tripped on a tree stump. He fell face first into the mud.

“Get a grip, fool,” he said, getting up.

It was then that he saw it. At first it seemed like a large animal carcass. But as he looked closer, Malcolm saw the clothes. It was a boy. A boy about his age.

Malcolm remembered hearing about some kid who had gone snowshoeing last winter and gotten lost. He had never been found.

“This must be him,” Malcolm said, feeling more sad than scared.

The head faced out from down in its lap. In places grayish-white bone stuck out through the rotted flesh. A small, black snake slithered out from the dark neck stump.

“The cold must have done that,” Malcolm mumbled, not quite ready to believe low temperatures resulted in decapitation. “Yeah, he must have frozen to death.”

“*Would have,*” a gruesomely familiar voice suddenly whispered in Malcolm’s ear. “*But I got to him first.*”

Malcolm turned around slowly and saw it, hovering there less than a foot away from his face. Something not human. Nowhere near human.

“*He didn’t know it at the time, but he was looking for his home, too,*” the thing said, slurping at the air. “*Now you’re both home.*”

Malcolm tried to run. But one, two, three steps down the trail something wet and slimy and sharp wrapped around his neck and pulled him back home.

Malcolm didn’t even have time to—

AAAAH!

Ghost Dogs

"On nights like these the dogs come out and take their revenge," Larry told the other two boys as they sat around the campfire. "That's what some of the old Indians say, anyway."

The three friends were squeezing in one more backpacking trip before going back to school. A freezing wind blew in off the river, blowing smoke and embers everywhere. The full moon disappeared behind some clouds.

Larry, who was a little older, had just finished telling the yawning Dixon brothers about how the men of the Lewis and Clark expedition barely survived their trip through the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho. Half-frozen and half-starving, the Corps of Discovery stumbled into a Nez Perce village just in time.

The Indians shared their salmon and roots with the travelers. But after stuffing themselves, the explorers got picky.

As they made their way down the Columbia River, Lewis and Clark would stop at every village along the way and trade the Native Americans for their dogs. All the Indians could do was shake their heads at these very strange strangers.

"Surrounded by all that delicious, pink salmon flesh and these guys ate dogs," Larry said. "You can understand why the ghosts of Spot, Fido, and Lassie might be a wee bit upset."

The brothers weren't sure if they should believe Larry, even though he was the history nerd of the group.

"Nah-uh," Simon was about to say when something wet and cold licked his nose. It had started to snow. Big, heavy flakes fell from the September night, a little early for snow but the mountains are like that.

"Night, losers," Larry called to the brothers as they went in their tent.

A few minutes later Simon was sleeping like a smelly baby, and in the other tent Larry was snoring up a storm of his own. Meanwhile, Danny shivered inside his cheap sleeping bag and wondered if he'd ever be able to get warm.

Sometime during the night—he couldn't tell how much time had gone by or if he'd slept at all—Danny heard what sounded like dogs howling. Or was it the wind and his tired mind playing tricks on him?

But a few minutes later, there it was again, louder and closer. He heard the howling just as clearly as he heard Larry snoring a few feet away. The dogs—or whatever it was—made a sad, mournful sound.

Through it all, Simon kept sleeping and Danny was once again amazed at how his brother could snooze through anything. The snow kept falling, sticking to the tent until it got too heavy and then rolling off in clumps. Danny poked his head out but didn't see anything except for all that snow.

At some point, Danny passed out and finally slept. He could still hear the dogs in his dreams.

The next morning a half foot of soft snow covered everything. Danny got up first and then Simon. Larry had finally stopped snoring.

"That was some dumb, boring story Larry was trying to sell us last night, huh?" Simon said, stretching.

The brothers had breakfast and packed up their gear. But Larry still hadn't gotten up.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty, time to get a move on," Simon said finally. Danny threw a snowball at Larry's tent. And then he noticed that the snow around the bottom of the tent wasn't white. It was dark. Red even.

Worried now, Danny stuck his head inside the tent. Larry looked like he had been ripped apart by wolves. Or dogs. What was left of him looked like the pink salmon flesh he had talked about the night before. There was animal hair mixed in with everything too.

Danny screamed and then Simon looked in the tent and he screamed too. And then they screamed together. And then they screamed some more. It would take a lot more screaming before the brothers realized that there weren't any animal tracks anywhere near Larry's tent. All that soft, fresh snow and not one single paw print.

The boys just kept screaming.

[Now scream. Hopefully your listeners will join you. Just keep screaming together, or alone. Just keep screaming...]

Larry's account of the Lewis and Clark expedition is true. The explorers really did prefer to eat dog meat rather than fish, even though they were in the salmon capital of the world. They also preferred dog meat to horsemeat, which they were forced to eat sometimes.

By the way, cases of wolves attacking humans are quite rare. A healthy wild wolf has not killed anyone in the United States in the last 50 years. Dogs, on the other hand, killed 32 Americans in 2007 alone.

*And now
a special Christmas gift...*

Being Zak Bagans

(Welcome to Hell Series)

by

O. Penn-Coughin

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YOU COME TOO PUBLISHING



Being Zak Bagans

Chapter 1

Hunter woke up in a cold sweat. His heart was pounding in his ears.

He sat up in bed, turned the lamp on, and tried to catch his breath. He glanced at the alarm clock. It read 3:03.

The nightmare again. The same nightmare that had haunted him since he was seven years old. Ever since that time he fell into an old well and was stuck down there for hours before they could reach him.

He grabbed the glass of water on the nightstand.

He tried to think about happy things: the new *Gears of War* PlayStation game that was coming out next week; his brand new digital video camera; and tomorrow's trip to the silver mine.

But no matter what Hunter tried to think about, his thoughts came back to the nightmare.

The dream always started the same. He was back down in the well. Half submerged in the putrid water. In the dark. Alone. His brother had gone to get help and Hunter was alone down there.

He closed his eyes and plugged his nose, trying to hold on until his brother got back. He felt along the walls, looking for something to hold on to. His feet didn't touch the bottom of the well and he had to keep dog paddling, flailing desperately to stay afloat.

But there was nothing along the wall to grab hold. Just a smooth, slimy surface. No way to climb out. He was stuck down there. Stuck. Would always be stuck. Would never get out of there. Trapped forever, dead in this prison of dead water.

After what felt like an eternity, he heard his brother's voice.

"Hunter!" Austin yelled. "You still down there?"

Hunter could make out the silhouette of his head and shoulders high above. Austin had a flashlight and was pointing it down at the water.

"Yeah!" Hunter said.

For the first time since he fell in, he felt hopeful. He was gonna get out of there. He was gonna make it. He was gonna live.

"The rescue crew is on its wa—"

Austin's voice fell silent.

"You still up there, Austin?"

There was no answer.

"Austin?"

Suddenly Austin started screaming.

"Oh, my God! What is that? There's something down there with you. No. Nooo!"

And then Hunter felt something. Something strong reaching out from under the water, wrapping tightly around his leg.

He let out a bloodcurdling scream and began thrashing and kicking wildly around in the water. But it was no use.

His frantic screams soon became gurgles as the thing yanked him under. Pulled him down, down, down under the water. Down all the way to the bottom of the well. And then beyond the

bottom of the well. It was hot down there. Too hot to live. And yet he was surrounded by them. No end of evil things.

Hunter shuddered. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get back to sleep that night. Not even with the lights on.

Chapter 2

Hunter Saracen had been interested in the paranormal ever since. Nothing had actually grabbed him or pulled him under the water that day, but he was convinced he wasn't alone down there in that well.

When the firefighters finally came and pulled him out, he couldn't stop shaking. Everyone thought it was the cold or that he had gone into shock. But it was the thought of what might have been down there with him that haunted Hunter.

It still haunted him all these years later.

Hunter lived in a town called Tule Creek just outside of Las Vegas in the arid and vast Nevada desert. He lived in a small house with his mom and Austin.

Hunter's best friend was Blake Griswold. They had been tight ever since first grade, when Hunter and Blake were on the same little league baseball team. They both sat on the bench most of the season. Other kids called them nerds, dorks, geeks, or dweebs. And those were the nice ones.

In reality, Blake was the actual geek. Hunter was more of a tweener. Closer to a geek than to a jock like his brother, but definitely not full-blown dweeb material.

In any case, they were cool with the insults most of the time. They didn't need to pretend they were something they weren't. They felt at home with the things they liked. And they liked the same stuff. Video games. The original *Star Trek* series. Reality TV shows—the dumber the better. And the paranormal.

Blake was almost as obsessed with the paranormal as Hunter. Blake's mother had told him a story once about the grandfather he never knew.

He had died in a car accident when Blake's mom was just a teenager. The night of the accident his mom was doing homework, when she suddenly saw him in the living room in front of her. He was standing there, smiling. And then he was gone.

Half an hour later, a police officer came to the door and told her that her father had died in a car wreck.

Ever since Blake heard that story, he was hooked on anything and everything having to do with ghosts.

The two boys talked for hours on end about the paranormal. About what a ghost would really look like. Whether they appeared as white sheets or as a mist in the form of a person. About what made ghosts. Unfinished business? Revenge? A violent death?

More than anything, Hunter and Blake wanted to be ghost hunters. They felt like they had seen enough reality TV shows on the subject to make them experts. Hunter often wondered if it was his destiny that his parents had named him Hunter, as in ghost *hunter*.

Sometimes he would borrow his mom's ancient, heavy video camera and they would go to places around town that were supposedly haunted. The basement of the library which used to be the old courthouse in the days of the Wild West. A barn on the outskirts of town where people said the ghost of Barnaby Hoyt still "lived" after a horse killed him by kicking him in the head more than 100 years ago. The middle school track, rumored to have been built atop an ancient Indian burial ground.

But in all of their explorations, Hunter and Blake never found any serious evidence of paranormal activity. The hours and hours of video footage never showed anything solid.

There were a few occasions when the hairs on Hunter's arms had stood up straight and his skin had turned to goose flesh. Or one time, he thought he heard footsteps in the barn loft when they were chanting Barnaby Hoyt's name. But he could never really prove any of it.

Finally, Hunter came to the conclusion that they weren't capturing any decent evidence because of their low-tech equipment. But that was about to change.

He had just bought a kicked-up digital video camera. And Blake now had a state-of-the-art voice recorder.

Hunter was now convinced they'd be able to pick up all the things that they'd never been able to with the old equipment. They could actually be serious paranormal investigators, Hunter thought. If anything was going to capture a ghost, this stuff would. They had finally joined the 21st century and nothing was going to stop them.

He was ready for his first official paranormal investigation.

So ready.

Chapter 3

It was going to be a great day. Nothing was going to get in the way of that. Not a nightmare. Not a little missed sleep. Not even Austin.

Hunter would have preferred if his mom was driving but it was still kind of cool that Austin was taking them. Even though he could be a real pain in the butt sometimes—like pretty much every waking minute.

Every nightmare comes to an end though, Hunter thought. He felt himself knocking on the door of sixteen. He could almost taste it.

My days are numbered, brocephus. I'll have my license before Christmas.

But in a way, Christmas had come early. They were headed to an old abandoned silver mine just outside of Junction City, about an hour and half away. Hunter was on his way to his first paranormal investigation!

Hunter carefully placed his camera, digital recorder, and a Ouija board inside his backpack.

The Ouija board was something Hunter had read about in books. Even though he had never seen any of the ghost hunters use one on TV, it was supposedly the best old school way to talk to spirits. Hunter had never used one—his inner nerd wouldn't allow it—but he figured he might as well give it a shot. He saw this as a sign of maturity. Being open to things and not so black and white about stuff.

He was clear on his “prime directive,” as they said on *Star Trek*. He was determined to make contact with a ghost and capture some sort of proof that they were real. That way, he'd be able to shut his brother up when he made fun of Hunter's obsession with earthbound spirits.

And who knew, maybe if he caught something good enough, Hunter and Blake would be able to have their own TV show someday. Or at least be on their way.

If ghosts existed, Hunter reasoned, then anything was possible.

Having a TV show would be awesome. Hunter could picture himself, going into the darkest and scariest places on earth, capturing it all on tape. Everyone watching, seeing how brave he was.

That would be *sick*, he thought.

Hunter saw Blake coming down the street on his bike.

Blake had red hair and freckles. He looked like one of those baseball players from the 1920's. He was a little stocky and pudgy and had a pug-looking face that scrunched up when he got angry. But that didn't happen too often. Despite the way he looked, Blake wasn't the angry type.

“Hey, man,” Hunter said when Blake got to the car. “I thought you might still be sleeping.”

“No way, H. I've been up for hours,” Blake said, grinning. “I couldn't sleep. I was too excited about today's adventure.”

“Me, too, I guess,” Hunter said, yawning as he remembered the nightmare.

“You girls just about ready?” Austin said, coming out from the house.

“All ready,” Hunter said, letting the jab bounce off of him.

Chapter 4

The sun was sharp and bright, already high above the Nevada desert. Hunter watched the arid landscape passing by in a blur out the window. He held a weathered guidebook in his hands, but there was no reason to open it. He'd read through the chapter on Sander's Mine so many times that he knew it by heart.

It was a guidebook he'd found in a used bookstore back in Tule Creek when he was nine years old. It claimed to have all the haunted places in Nevada and included the history behind them. Of the more than 100 ghost towns and haunted places, Sander's Mine had grabbed Hunter's attention the most. Ever since he first read about it, he had wanted to visit the mine.

It had been built in the late 1860s. The hills in the area were crawling with prospectors searching for riches. The mine was the work of a man named Joseph Sanders, who found silver at the spot. Sanders had died in an accident shortly after building the mine when a large boulder fell and struck him in the head, killing him instantly.

Other prospectors picked up where Sanders left off. But the death toll at the mine was high. Unusually high. According to the book, several workers died in cave ins or mysterious accidents. A fire took out six men in 1870. One miner who had barely escaped the flames with his life, told people that right before the accident he saw a fiery red glow coming from the depths of the mine.

And then he heard evil laughter.

That part always sent shivers down Hunter's spine. The laughter part. Like the mine was alive. Like something was down there with the men. Something evil.

It seemed that the mine was cursed, haunted by some malevolent entity that enjoyed killing people. But all the deaths and all the stories didn't keep the miners away.

What eventually drove them off was when the silver ran out. The mine was abandoned for good in 1875, leaving behind a deep and vacant hole on the side of a hill and a little cemetery nearby.

In the 1950s it was turned into a tourist spot with guided tours, but Hunter had never heard of it outside of the book.

All he knew was that it would be the perfect place for a paranormal investigation.

"How much longer till we get there?" Blake yelled from the backseat over the music coming from the stereo.

Austin was cranking Metallica's *St. Anger*, like he always did lately whenever he drove his mom's car. Either that or Ozzy.

"And can you turn that down," Blake said. "It's too early for all this yelling."

"We've still got about 40 miles," Austin said, looking back at Blake in the rearview. "And a spot's just opened up in the trunk for you if you don't like the tunes or the volume."

Blake looked out the window.

Hunter looked at the clock. 9:55. Normally he'd still be in bed at this time.

"So, why don't you ladies explain to me why I'm driving all this way today to get to an abandoned mine in the middle of nowhere?" Austin asked a few minutes later, turning the music down. "I could use a laugh."

Stay cool, Hunter told himself. Stay cool.

“People died there in the 1800s,” Blake said, leaning forward and resting his arms on the back of Austin’s seat. “There’s supposed to be some sort of entity in there that kills people.”

He was almost as much of an expert on the mine as Hunter. They’d spent hours reading and rereading that guidebook, *Nevada Ghost Towns and Haunts*.

“And you guys really believe that it’s haunted?” Austin said.

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” Hunter said. “From what I know, no other ghost hunting crew has been there before. We’re the first ones to investigate this place.”

“And you guys call yourself a *crew*?” Austin said sarcastically, showing the chipped tooth he’d gotten from football practice a few weeks earlier.

“Well, there’s three of us, so, yeah,” Hunter said defensively. “We are a crew.”

“Hey, there’s two of you, math whiz. I’m not part of your little ghost hunting posse. Get that straight right now. I’m just the driver.”

“I bet you’re just scared,” Blake said, sitting back. “I bet you don’t even have the guts to come into the cave with us.”

“I’m not coming into the cave because I don’t want to waste my time,” Austin said to the mirror. “There’s no such thing as ghosts, and anybody who thinks they exist is plain stupid.”

“Yeah, right,” Hunter said. “What about all those ghost hunters on TV? They’re on TV, so they can’t be all that stupid.”

“Jeez, Hunter, those people take the stupid cake,” Austin said, shaking his head. “I can’t believe you’re so gullible.”

“Wanna know what I think?” Blake said. “I think there’s a big slice of that stupid cake with your name on it.”

Hunter started laughing hard.

“Whatever, man. At least I have a girlfriend and I don’t spend my days chasing after dead people.”

Hunter stopped laughing. It was true. He was secretly in love with Heidi Wyatt. But his dream girl was dating a star football player at school named Josh Crowder. The math added up to *no girlfriend*.

He looked out the window. The brown hills looked blurry from the heat in the distance and the landscape looked exactly the same as it had twenty minutes earlier.

One of these days Hunter was going to prove to Austin that ghosts existed. And then, when he and Blake had their own show on TV, Austin would want in on the ghost hunting crew so bad he’d be begging to join.

Hunter closed his eyes and dreamed of that day.

Chapter 5

"Time for some grub," Austin said, pulling into the McDonald's parking lot in Junction City.

"Good," Hunter said. "I've gotta pee something wicked."

After hitting the bathroom, they ordered breakfast from the girl behind the counter. There was something vacant in her eyes that gave Hunter the creeps. But maybe she was just tired. Hunter would be too if he had to work in this place all day and live his life in a burnt-out town like this.

"Make yourself a nice day," the girl said on their way out.

Hunter shivered. She sure was creepy.

Hunter pulled out the map, tracing the lines with his finger.

"Okay, we're gonna want to make a left coming up here," he said a few minutes later.

Austin nodded. They were soon going down a dirt road, the car shaking and bouncing as it dropped down into a series of Grand Canyon-sized potholes.

Hunter grabbed the backpack at his feet and held onto it. He didn't want any of the equipment getting damaged. After about ten minutes, the road dead ended at a dirt parking lot.

"Finally," Austin sighed.

"This is it?" Blake asked.

"I guess so," Hunter said, looking at the guidebook.

The photos were black and white.

"You sure it's still open?" Austin said.

"Has to be," Hunter said.

Hunter took off his black, Zak Bagans-style, flat-brimmed baseball cap and wiped the sweat from his forehead. It was getting hot.

"Losing your cool already, Vanilla Ice?" Austin said, shaking his head.

"C'mon," Hunter said to Blake. "We're never gonna find anything just sitting here."

They got out of the car.

"All right, you ladies have a nice time," Austin said, grabbing his iPhone from the dashboard and starting up a video game. "I'll be out here in the car. Oh, and try not to lose control of your bowels in there. It's a long drive back home to stew in your own offerings."

Hunter flipped him off and started walking.

"What?" Austin said, smiling. "I was making a valid point."

"Stuff your *valid points* where the sun don't shine!" Hunter said.

After a few minutes, the rolling path led them to a view of a small black hole framed by wooden beams in the side of a hill.

They kept walking and came to an old sign.

"Sanders Mine," Hunter read.

"This is it," Blake said.

"Yeah, this is it," Hunter repeated, looking at the small dark opening, disappointment in his voice.

This wasn't how he had imagined it. He thought the mine would have been a lot bigger. It just seemed like a dark hole. He hoped it would be worth all the driving.

"Hey, that must be the graveyard," Blake said, looking over to the right.

There were some beat-up old wooden crosses about 100 feet away from the cave entrance. The picket fence surrounding the little burial ground was leaning in places, completely missing in others. According to the guidebook, some of the miners' bodies were never found. There was nothing under some of those markers. Not even bones.

Hunter thought it was sad and more than a little creepy.

"Maybe we can take a longer look after we come back out," he said.

"Yeah, maybe there are some spirits hanging around up here," Blake said.

"All right, let's come up with a game plan," Hunter said, adjusting his pack. "First, let's see how far back the mine goes. And then let's conduct some EVP sessions."

EVP sessions—for Electronic Voice Phenomena—were when a ghost investigator provoked the spirits and asked them questions, then tried to capture their voices on digital recorders.

"Sounds good," Blake nodded. "You think it's really haunted?"

Hunter looked at the dark hole carved out in the hill and sighed.

"It better be."

Chapter 6

Hunter and Blake went through the small opening and into the mine, pointing their flashlights in front of them. The darkness was overwhelming. Whatever light came through the small opening was immediately sucked away by the cave walls.

And it was cold in there, too. Hunter wished he'd brought a sweatshirt. That would have been a good idea. In all the excitement, he hadn't thought about the temperature of the mine.

But that was okay. Hunter didn't see Zak Bagans going around with a sweatshirt on *Ghost Adventures*. Even when it was cold, he didn't wear long sleeves too often. It was all part of the ghost-hunting persona.

They followed the old wooden boards that ran down the middle of the mine floor.

"How far do you think it goes?" Blake asked, his voice echoing off the walls.

"It was big back in the day," Hunter whispered. "We'll have to see."

As they walked on, Hunter kept his eyes and ears open for anything unusual. Any shadow, any unexplained noise.

The ceiling began to close in on them, getting lower and lower with each step.

"Did you hear that?" Hunter asked, stopping.

It sounded like whistling coming from somewhere behind them.

They were quiet, but didn't hear it again.

"Aw, probably just the wind," Blake said. "We could pretty much debunk that as not being paranormal I think."

"Yeah," Hunter said, sighing. "You're probably right. C'mon. Let's keep going."

It was really getting claustrophobic now. They had to hunch over to avoid hitting their heads.

"Maybe we should turn back," Blake said. "H, I don't like these tight spaces. You know I have a condition."

"No," Hunter said, shaking his head. "Keep your phobia in your pants. We have to keep going. This is part of being a paranormal investigator. Sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do."

After a few more yards, Hunter came across a small opening on the right side of the cave.

"Look, man. It's a room."

The room was big enough to stand up in and Hunter was glad to stretch his back. He pointed his flashlight at the walls.

"Look," Blake said.

The walls were covered with writing. There was modern day graffiti with older chicken scratch showing through underneath. Names had been carved into the rock.

"Joseph Sanders," Hunter said a minute later, tracing his fingers over the only name he recognized. "I wonder what part of the mine he died in."

"Why don't we just ask him?" Blake said.

Hunter grinned. That was one of the awesome things about being a paranormal investigator. If you listened hard enough, the ghosts would answer your questions. It was like that in the shows anyway.

Hunter brought out his camera and turned off the flashlight. He knew that ghosts would be less likely to show up if they had a bright light shining in their faces. Blake did the same with his flashlight. Suddenly there was nothing but blackness all around them.

Hunter switched on the night vision setting and Blake pressed record on his digital recorder, holding it away from him so the spirits could talk into it more easily.

"I want to talk to the spirit of Joseph Sanders," Hunter said in a loud and booming voice.

"Did you die in here, Sanders? Where did you die?"

They were completely quiet. Hunter knew from watching all the episodes of *Ghost Adventures* that sometimes, you couldn't hear the spirits with your own ears. Sometimes only the camera or digital recorder would pick up those faint sounds, and any additional noise would make it more difficult to hear what the spirits were saying.

After a long enough pause, he asked another question.

"Were you a victim of the creature that haunts this mine?"

They were quiet again. They heard nothing. Hunter hoped the equipment was picking up something.

"Are you trapped in here, Sanders?" Blake said.

"Good question, Blakey," Hunter whispered.

He couldn't see, but he knew Blake was probably grinning with pride.

"Hey, don't call me *Blakey* in front of the camera," Blake said.

"Copy that," Hunter said.

They were quiet again, listening for some sort of answer.

But the only reply came from the wind whistling down the shaft.

Blake started speaking in a loud, raspy whisper.

"Dude, do you think we're getting—"

Suddenly, there was a noise coming from somewhere behind them. It sounded like small rocks hitting the ground. Hunter spun his camera around quickly, pointing it in the direction of the noise.

He didn't see any movement, no evidence that anything had fallen or been moved.

But something had.

"I guess we can take that as a *yes* to the question," Blake said.

"Joseph Sanders, are you in here?" Hunter said, not able to contain the excitement in his voice. "That was you, wasn't it? You just made that noise, didn't you?"

Hunter kept his camera pointed at the area where the noise had come from. But there was no response. At least nothing that Hunter could see or hear.

"Dude, I'm getting crazy chills right now," Blake said.

Hunter pointed the camera back at him so he could see him through the night vision. Blake held up his arm to the camera, showing the goose bumps that had broken out all over.

"I feel it, too," Hunter said.

To be honest though, he wasn't completely sure the sensation was caused by an encounter with a paranormal entity or the cold temperature.

They asked a few more questions, leaving long enough pauses for the spirit to respond into the digital recorder. They would review their findings when they got back home.

"All right, I think we've got what we needed in here. Let's keep going down the mine," Hunter said, turning on his flashlight.

"Do we really have to, man?" Blake said. "That ceiling looks like it only gets lower down there."

"Yeah, man. We really do have to," Hunter said, rolling his eyes in the dark. "You go first—face your fears and all that."

Blake sighed.

What was the point of coming here if they didn't explore every part of the mine? Sometimes, Hunter just didn't get Blake. He was like that at school, too. He'd do most of the hard work, reading and studying until he really knew a thing, but then he'd lose interest or something and checkout. He would pass his classes, but just barely. He just didn't finish.

Of course, in here the thing that was causing him to lose interest was his fear.

Well, that would all have to change if they were going to be paranormal investigators, Hunter thought. Blake would have to be thorough. He'd have to learn how to finish things because the investigations and their future fame as reality TV stars depended on it.

A minute later they went back in the mine shaft, crawling on their hands and knees to keep from hitting their heads.

"Dude, I hope the McDonald's food is sitting all right in your stomach because I don't want to be here when, you know, it hits the fan, if you know what I mean," Hunter said from behind Blake.

Blake laughed.

"If that *ends* up being the case, I guess it's a good thing I'm going first," he said.

"Good for you, you mean," Hunter said.

"Yeah, good for me."

Hunter laughed.

"Hey, so did you hear that Heidi Wyatt broke up with Josh Crowder?" Blake said.

Hunter almost stopped dead in his tracks, but played it cool and kept going like he didn't care.

"Oh, really?" he said, no emotion in his voice.

Hunter had had it bad for Heidi for a year now. But he had pretty much given up hope. He knew his video game skills and the *Star Trek* trivia treasure trove between his ears couldn't compete against a popular running back like Josh Crowder.

"Yeah, so I don't know. Maybe when we capture evidence of a ghost in here, you can show it to her and she'll be all like, 'Hunter, you're so brave,'" Blake said in a high-pitched voice.

"Won't you go out with me?"

"Shut up, Blakey," Hunter said. "Focus on how the walls are closing in all around you or something."

He had thought of the same exact scenario Blake had just described. Except in Hunter's head, it had all sounded much more believable.

"I'm just saying. Now's your chance," Blake said. "She's available, and being that we're going to be future reality TV stars, it would behoove her to get in on your action while she still can."

"*Behoove*? Really, man?"

"Yeah. Behoove. It's going to be a big word. Just you wait and see."

Hunter laughed. This was why he hung out with Blake. He had trouble finishing things and suffered from claustrophobia, but Blake was hilarious and fun to be around.

"Hey, are we there yet?" Blake said.

"Stop complaining, man. I see the end right up ahe—"

Suddenly, Hunter heard a voice. A deep, dark, bloodcurdling voice. He dropped his flashlight and was immediately swallowed up by darkness.

"I'm coming for you, Huuunteeeerrr," it said. "You've been a very bad boyyyyy."

Then Hunter felt something grab his legs. It started pulling him backwards.

Hunter couldn't help himself. He started screaming, his voice cracking with fear.

"Nooooooooooooo!"

The hands—or whatever it was—kept pulling, kept dragging him across the dirt floor. Hunter couldn't stop screaming.

Chapter 7

The ghost finally let go. Then a loud, evil snicker filled the mine. A second later a flashlight was in Hunter's face. He stopped screaming and squinted, trying to make out the figure in front of him.

He knew that snicker. The recognition turned to uncontrollable rage.

"You sonuvabitch!" he screamed, his anger echoing down the shaft. "Sonuvabitch! Sonuvabitch!"

Hunter lunged for the light shining in his face, toppling Austin over. He started beating on him with his fists.

Austin kept laughing.

"Hey, hey. I was only having fun. Stop it!"

But Hunter didn't stop.

"That's enough, man!" Austin said, pushing his brother off.

"That was such a bastardly move," Blake said from behind them, his voice shaky.

He must have thought it was real too, Hunter thought.

"I didn't mean to make you guys stain your shorts," Austin said, smoothing back his hair. "I just wanted in on the fun. It was getting hot out there in the car."

"Sonuvabitch," Hunter said again, checking his camera to make sure no damage was done in the fight.

"C'mon, don't be such a wuss," Austin said. "Besides, you'd think you'd be happy. I want to see what you guys do exactly during your *investigations*."

Austin made quotation marks in the air with his fingers around the last word.

"Maybe I could hold a camera or something," he said, a devilish grin on his face.

Hunter wanted to start punching him again.

"You don't get to be part of the crew," Hunter said. "You have to earn your way onto our crew."

Austin's laughter echoed all around them.

"And how does one earn their way onto your lame crew?"

"You have to prove yourself," Blake said. "Like doing something really scary on your own."

"Aren't you guys a little old for all this *Ghostbusters* nonsense?"

"You sound scared to me," Blake said. "I bet you don't even have the guts to try out for the crew."

"I so don't want to be on your lame little crew," Austin said. "Thanks very much for the offer, but no."

"Chicken," Hunter mumbled under his breath.

Austin gave him a dirty look, like he'd hit a nerve.

"Fine. What do I have to do to get in your loser club?"

Hunter looked back at Blake. By the look in his eye, they were thinking the same thing. Hunter turned back to Austin.

"You have to stay in that room back there," Hunter said, pointing behind them. "By yourself for 15 minutes. Just you and a digital recorder. No flashlight."

"That's it?" Austin said, yawning. "You couldn't come up with something scarier?"

“People died down here, man,” Hunter said. “You don’t know what angry spirits are still trapped. You have to capture something paranormal. Otherwise, you’re not a part of the crew.”

“No such thing, but I’ll give it a try only to show you ladies how it’s done.”

“Fine,” Hunter said, slapping the recorder into Austin’s hand. “You do know how to use this, right?”

“Duh,” Austin said.

He brushed past them in the small cavern, and started crawling back toward where the room was. “I’ll see you fools in a few.”

“Sonuvabitch,” Hunter muttered under his breath.

Chapter 8

"I command you spirits, speak through this board. Tell us why you are still here," Hunter said in a deep voice.

He had set up the camera on a tripod in the corner, along with a digital recorder to capture any unexplained noises or disembodied voices, and they were sitting around the Ouija board on the cold, sandy floor at the end of the mine shaft. Hunter had read in the guidebook that initially the mine had gone on much farther and deeper into the earth's crust. But for safety reasons, they had walled up the remaining parts, making this small room the end of the line.

Hunter and Blake had been at the Ouija board for five minutes. They had their hands carefully placed on the center pointer (the *planchette*, as the instructions called it), waiting to be guided by something.

But so far, there had been no invisible pushing. No guidance.

Hunter looked into the camera.

"Sometimes, the spirits are not always willing to communicate," he said. "You have to be patient and wait for them to come to you."

That part would most likely be edited out of the final video cut. But Hunter thought it might be good to have in case nothing more panned out here.

"Tell us your name," Blake said, closing his eyes.

But the pointer didn't move. Hunter sighed. He'd have to work on his patience in these paranormal investigations. Patience wasn't something that came naturally to him. But he knew that it belonged in the arsenal of any serious investigator.

"This isn't working," Blake whispered under his breath, trying not to let the camera hear the doubt in his voice.

"Take it easy, we just started," Hunter said.

He turned his attention back to the board.

"Did you die here in this mine?" Hunter asked loudly.

Suddenly, the planchette began to move ever so slightly.

"Dude, are you doing that?" Blake said, looking over at Hunter all big eyed.

"No," Hunter said, shaking his head while his hands were slowly guided across the board.

Hunter looked over at the camera.

"The spirits have decided to make contact now," he said, trying to play it cool and contain his smile.

The pointer went over to the Yes corner of the board.

"Are you the ghost of Joseph Sanders?" Blake asked.

The planchette started drifting across the board. Blake sounded out the letters for the camera.

"M-I-N-E," he said.

"Tell us if you're Joseph Sanders," Hunter asked. "Or if not, spell out your name."

The pointer began drifting across the board again but soon started swinging wildly all over the place. Hunter couldn't keep up with the letters. Blake looked up, giving Hunter a terrified look.

Then the board piece flew up, crashed against the wall, and landed in the dark sand.

"Whoa, du—" Hunter started saying.

Then the flashlight went out and everything went black.

A spine-chilling scream filled the shaft, echoing down its narrow rock walls. Hunter's heart exploded in his ears.

"Are you there, Blake?" Hunter asked, trying to keep the fear out of his voice.

"Yeah," Blake whispered. "What was that?"

"I don't know," he said, suddenly realizing he did.

His eyes grew big.

"Austin!" he shouted.

Hunter fumbled on the ground for his flashlight. He found it and switched it on, but it was dead. Why wasn't Blake turning his on? Hunter reached for where he thought the camera was, knocking it off its tripod. He grabbed it, turned on the night vision, and looked through it, letting it guide him down the narrow shaft. He crawled on his hands and knees on the cold sand.

"Wait, Hunter!" he could hear Blake saying from behind him. "Wait up."

But Hunter couldn't stop and wait for Blake.

That scream had sounded like a death scream or something. Hunter knew that scream. It had been the same scream he had let loose after falling down the well all those years ago. It was the way he imagined men falling to their deaths screamed.

And it had come from Austin.

He had to find his brother.

"Austin!" Hunter yelled. "Are you okay?"

But there was no answer. The mine was completely silent, except for Hunter's heavy breathing.

He crawled as fast as he could, keeping the camera pointed ahead of him. He finally made it to the small room off to the side of the main shaft. He went in and scanned the ground.

And then he saw it. There was a lifeless figure crumpled in the corner.

It was Austin.

Chapter 9

Hunter ran over to Austin, shaking him.

“Austin!” he shouted. “Austin!”

Hunter thought he was dead. A million thoughts raced through his mind. What was he going to tell their mom? The mine had all been his idea and now his brother had paid the ultimate price for it.

How would Hunter ever be able to live with himself?

“Wake up, Austin!” Hunter cried.

Austin groaned. Hunter’s heart skipped a beat. Could it be? Was Austin really alive?

“What hap—”

“We need to get out of here,” Hunter said. “C’m on.”

Hunter found the digital recorder down in the sand a few feet away and stuffed it in his pocket.

There was no time now to think about what had happened to Austin. All he knew was that he was freaked out of his mind and that he had to get out of there.

Hunter wanted out of this dark hole in the earth. But bad.

He pulled Austin up to his feet. His brother was practically comatose and heavy. Hunter felt a cold blast of air howl past him when they reached the main tunnel. And then he remembered that Blake was still somewhere back there. What was taking him so long?

“Damn it,” Hunter said.

He knew he couldn’t just leave Blake. Even if Austin was hurt, Hunter couldn’t leave his best friend behind. That wasn’t what best friends did.

“Blake!” he called out. “Blake!”

There was no answer.

He pointed the camera down the shaft where he had come from. He saw some movement.

“Finally,” Hunter said. “There you are.”

There was something crawling toward him.

A large, hulking shadow. And it was moving fast. Incredibly fast.

Horror-struck, Hunter realized that the thing coming toward him wasn’t Blake.

“Oh, my God!” Hunter screamed, watching the black figure close in.

And that’s when he made the executive decision to get the hell out of there.

He pulled Austin’s arm over his shoulder and started dragging him as fast as he could. He didn’t look back down the shaft. He didn’t want to see how close the thing was.

Toward the end, Hunter thought his heart might give out it was beating so fast. Austin would have never known what happened. He was that out of it.

Finally, Hunter saw a burst of light at the end of the tunnel. He had never felt so happy in his entire life, aside from the time when they pulled him out of that well. He picked up the pace, dragging and willing Austin along. And then the light became so strong, it almost blinded him.

Suddenly, they were out in it. In the light and the hot Nevada desert. It all felt so good.

They had made it.

Breathing hard, Hunter dropped Austin onto the warm sand. He fell down on his knees, thankful to be alive. Thankful to be out of the darkness.

It was all good. Except for one thing.

Blake was still in there.

Chapter 10

Hunter took a look at Austin. He had a large gash across his forehead, blood dripping down onto his Kmart Rolling Stones shirt. He was still out of it. Hunter knew he needed to get him to a doctor.

“Austin,” he said, pinching his brother’s arm. “Austin, can you hear me?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled, holding his head.

“Blake’s still in there. I have to go get him.”

“No,” Austin slurred. “Don’t go back in there, Hunter!”

There was something in his voice that he hadn’t heard in years. Fear.

“I have to,” Hunter said, even though he knew where Austin was coming from. “I can’t leave him there.”

“No, there’s something in th—”

“Thanks a lot, you bastards!” a voice shouted from behind Hunter.

He spun around.

A round figure was stumbling out of the cave.

It was Blake, squinting into the bright summer’s day.

Hunter couldn’t believe their luck. He had been sure whatever dark creature was chasing them had gotten Blake, and he half expected to find his body when he went back.

“Jesus!” Hunter said. “Are you okay, Blake?”

“What? You mean, aside from being abandoned by my *former* best friend, am I okay?”

Blake’s face was scrunched up, making him look like an angry bulldog.

“Sorry about that, dude. But Austin was hurt and I saw... I saw...”

Hunter trailed off.

What had he seen?

“That was super weak, man,” Blake said. “I don’t care what you saw. Remember the first rule of paranormal investigations? You don’t run.”

Hunter flashed back to the first ever episode of *Ghost Adventures*. The part where Nick got scared and started running. Zak had to chase him down and yell at him to stop. Because ghost hunters don’t run. First rule. Prime directive stuff. Even when things got really scary.

Especially when things got really scary.

Blake was right. Hunter had broken the first rule.

But there had to be an exception at some point. Austin was hurt. He had to get him out of there he told himself. Still, he didn’t feel right about it. Questions swirled around in his mind. What would he have done if Austin had been fine? Did he run out because his brother was injured or because of the thing coming toward him? Would he have really gone back in the mine to look for Blake? Of course he would have, he wanted to say. But he wasn’t completely sure.

“Sorry, man,” Hunter said, shaking his head. “You’re right. That was... that was wrong of me.”

“I don’t care. I’m still pissed,” Blake said. “Lucky for you, I got all the equipment you left back there.”

Hunter patted Blake’s backpack.

“Good job, man. But we need to get Austin to a doctor,” Hunter said. “Help me get him back to the car.”

“What happened to him?” Blake asked.

“I don’t know. Something bad.”

Chapter 11

Hunter's hands shook as they gripped the wheel. He had driven a few times before, but never outside of Tule Creek, and always with his mom guiding him in the passenger's seat. Now he had his brain-damaged brother next to him and an angry best friend steaming in the backseat.

He was doing his best to remember what his mom had taught him. Taking the emergency brake off, putting the car into drive. Signaling. But as Hunter approached Junction City, what had seemed like a burnt-out little town suddenly appeared to be bustling with cars and traffic. Hunter gritted his teeth.

"All right, thanks," Blake said into his phone.

"They say there's just the one doctor in town," he said. "Across the street from McDonald's."

The doctor said Austin would be all right. But along with the deep cut on his forehead, he had a minor concussion. She cleaned and wrapped the wound with a white bandage. Austin looked like a mummy.

She wanted him to stay a few hours for observation, but Austin said no.

The doctor said he couldn't drive. They would have to spend the night or get a ride. Hunter almost called their mom back in Tule Creek to ask her to pick them up, but then he realized that they had her car.

They went back to McDonald's to get some sodas. The few people inside gave Austin some weird looks.

The creepy girl was still there.

"Make yourself a nice day," she said again when she handed Hunter his change.

By the time they finished the sodas, Austin seemed a lot better. The glazed look had left his eyes and he was starting to sound like himself again.

"I can make it back," Austin said, holding his hand out for the car keys. "We'll be fine."

"You heard what the doctor said," Hunter said.

"The doctor doesn't know what she's talking about," Austin said. "Besides, you'll be my wingman. If I start losing it, you can drive us the rest of the way back."

"That's stupid, Austin. I don't even have my license. You're not thinking clearly."

"Oh, I'm thinking clearly all right. I'm thinking that mom's gonna have a fit if she finds out about this. And I'm thinking I'm feeling good enough to drive."

Hunter didn't like it, but he didn't have any other ideas. He handed over the keys.

Austin got behind the wheel. Hunter and Blake took their usual spots.

Hunter looked back at Blake. He was still mad.

What had started out as a ghost adventure had turned into a full-blown, Category 5 turd storm of epic proportions. Austin was hurt, Blake was angry, and Hunter's mom was going to have a freak out after she took one look at his brother's head.

And they still had more than an hour of driving ahead of them.

But as the miles went by and Austin seemed liked he was holding his own, Hunter looked back on it and he didn't feel that bad. Not really. Because he had seen something in that mine. Something that confirmed his belief in the paranormal. Something that showed him he wasn't just chasing shadows.

Hunter had seen a ghost. A real ghost. And he had captured it on film.

Chapter 12

Hunter forced himself to make small talk every few minutes, mostly to check on Austin and help keep him focused on the road. Austin mostly grunted one word answers. Blake didn't say anything the whole way. Hunter didn't care. He was just grateful he didn't have to drive. But mostly he was grateful that thing in the mine hadn't gotten him.

Hunter thought about bringing up Austin's scream and subsequent KO, but he decided against it. They could talk about that later.

The important thing was that they had survived. And they were now sitting on paranormal gold. Hunter had captured something amazing on his camera. He was sure of it.

And that round little idiot back there doesn't even know it, he thought.

Maybe after they reviewed the footage, Blake would see that Hunter had good cause to break the first rule of ghost hunting and admit that he would have probably done the same thing.

That thing, that shadow was the scariest thing Hunter had ever seen. Scarier even than his nightmare. Because this had been real.

The way it had crawled through the tunnel toward him. It had been so fast and Hunter's heart raced to outrun it all over again sitting there in the car just thinking about it.

What was it? Who was it? Why had it let them get away?

As they pulled onto their street, Hunter vowed to one day go back to the cave and find out what—or *who*—the thing had been.

Chapter 13

Hunter got no end of flak from his mom over the incident.

Mostly he was getting the brunt of her anger because Austin was hurt. She wasn't going to take it out on Big Dumb Bandage Head. So that only left Hunter to get a lecture on being responsible and using his brain.

Didn't she know that they were paranormal investigators and that there was risk involved?

"Oh, Hunter," she said, shaking her head. "I don't understand why you still believe in all of that. I thought you would have grown out of it a long time ago."

Grow out of it? Was she crazy? This wasn't just a phase, something he was doing just to be cool. This was Hunter's life. And it had been ever since he fell in the well when he was seven years old. Why didn't she get that?

"Austin hitting his head wasn't part of the plan," he sighed. "I'm still not sure what happened."

"Listen, honey, I know it wasn't your fault, but just look at your brother, would you?" she said, nodding to Austin watching TV on the sofa, his brown hair peeking out in tufts above his bandage. "Those mines are dangerous."

She fiddled with her silver cross necklace.

"I don't want you going to places like that anymore," she said, shaking her head again. "It's just not safe."

This was pointless, Hunter thought as he went up to his room.

She just didn't get it. And she probably never would.

And like that, what should have been a great day—one of the best days of Hunter's life—had turned into one of the lamest. One of the super lamest.

Chapter 14

The next morning Hunter found Austin downstairs playing video games. He still had the white bandage wrapped around his head, still looking like a lobotomy patient.

Hunter sat down on the sofa next to him.

"So, uh, how's your head feeling?"

"Fine," Austin said, tapping away loudly at the plastic controller with his thumbs.

"Does it hurt?"

"I said it's fine."

"Listen, I didn't get a chance to thank you for taking us yesterday."

"Save it," Austin said. "I don't want to hear it."

Hunter didn't get why Austin was mad. Except that maybe he was feeling better and returning to his charming self. Or maybe their mom had chewed him out after learning that he had gone against the doctor's orders and driven back to Tule Creek.

But Hunter didn't see how any of that was his fault.

"Austin, what really happened to you in there?" Hunter said.

Might as well ask now, he thought. If he waited until the right moment presented itself, he might be waiting a long time. He had been dying to find out. What had Austin really seen? Was it the same creature that had been crawling down the mine after them?

"I bumped my head on the ceiling," Austin said. "You numbskulls did make me go in there without a flashlight."

"But, we heard you scream," Hunter said. "What made you scream?"

"I don't remember screaming," Austin said.

He was pretending to be completely focused on the video game, but his character was quickly losing his battle against some Mafioso mobster. The mobster was choking him and his character's life force was draining away.

"I'm serious, Austin," Hunter said, frustrated. "Tell me what you saw."

Austin paused the game and gave Hunter a sharp look.

"I told you, I didn't see anything. I hit my head in the dark and cracked it open. It's gonna hurt like hell during football practice this week. Now back off."

Hunter crossed his arms.

"You saw something, I know it. You just don't want to admit that you were wrong about the existence of the paranormal."

"I'm trying to play my video game here," Austin said angrily. "Why don't you go bug your girlfriend, Blake?"

"Shut up, man. We both know you're not telling me everything."

"Whatever," Austin said, unpausing the video game.

The Mafioso squeezed the last drops of life out of Austin's character. Sad music played while some words appeared on the screen.

"You Have Died."

"Look what you made me do," Austin said.

Hunter got up off the sofa.

"Whenever you do decide to stop being a wuss, let me know," Hunter said, walking away. "I'll save a spot for you on our crew. You've earned it."

He heard Austin sigh and restart the video game.

Chapter 15

Even though he could barely contain his excitement about what he had captured on film in the mine, Hunter didn't feel right going through the footage without Blake.

After all, Blake was part of the crew. He had put as much effort into the investigation as Hunter and he deserved to be among the first to view what the camera had recorded.

It was the last Sunday of summer. Tomorrow was the first day of school. The first day of Hunter's sophomore year in high school.

But Hunter couldn't think about that right now. Even Heidi Wyatt took a backseat to this. He had to see the footage and listen to the digital recorders.

He sent Blake a text message.

"Come over," he wrote. "We got work 2 do."

After ten minutes there was still no response. Blake must still be mad, Hunter thought.

He glanced over at the camera and digital recorder sitting on his desk and sighed.

How would Blake ever know if he took a peek at the footage? Answer: he wouldn't. Hunter could act like he'd never seen any of it when Blake finally stopped stewing.

Yeah, Hunter thought. Blake wouldn't have to know anything. Hunter stood up, going toward the desk, when his cell phone buzzed. A new text message from Blake glowed on the screen.

"Fine. On my way."

"So glad you're deciding to grace us with your presence," Hunter mumbled out loud to no one in particular.

Chapter 16

“Just for the record, I think what you did really blows,” Blake said, zipping open his backpack and pulling out his digital recorder. “And I’m only here because I want to review the evidence.”

“Fair enough,” Hunter said. “Let’s go over the video first.”

He grabbed the camera and began hooking it up to his television. He closed the blinds so there wouldn’t be any reflected light to interfere with their analysis.

“How’s your brother doing?” Blake asked while Hunter searched for the right input on the TV.

“His head’s better. But he’s being super lame,” Hunter said. “I know he saw something in the cave. You heard him scream, right? And he knows that I know he knows he saw something.”

Hunter remembered the black creature crawling quickly down the mine and he couldn’t wait to see it again on film. Blake would see it, too.

Hunter pressed play and they were back in the mine. Because of the night vision, everything on the TV screen appeared in shades of green.

First they were in the room with the names and graffiti on the walls. Hunter’s voice echoed, “I want to talk to the spirit of Joseph Sanders.”

Hunter watched the screen intently, analyzing every square inch. He knew that it was sometimes hard to spot evidence of paranormal activity. It could appear as a ball of light, a faint shadow, a mist. The best paranormal investigators knew this and spent hours reviewing their footage. Being a paranormal investigator wasn’t all glamour. No matter how cool the *Ghost Adventures* crew made it look on TV, Hunter knew they had to work hard to get the final product.

“Wait, stop it for a moment,” Blake said.

Hunter pressed the pause button on the remote control.

“Go back.”

Hunter hit rewind, slightly annoyed at Blake’s bossy tone. Hunter was the Zak Bagans of this outfit and Blake was the Nick Groff. Not the other around.

“Okay, there,” Blake said.

Hunter hit play and his eyes scanned the green screen.

He heard himself say he wanted to talk to Sanders again. And then there was silence while they waited to hear something.

“H, did you hear that?” Blake said suddenly, his eyes growing wide.

“No, what’d you hear?” Hunter said, turning around.

“I don’t know. It sounds like a growl or something.”

Hunter rewound the camera again and turned up the volume on the television to 40. The scene replayed. Again, Hunter asked to speak with Sanders and again there was that silence.

Except this time, there was something beyond the silence. Hunter heard it. A deep, low guttural noise that had no explanation for being there unless one of their stomach’s had rumbled right into the mic at that exact moment.

“Dude,” Hunter said.

“Let’s see what it sounds like on the recorder,” Blake said.

Hunter stood up and went over to the table, grabbing his digital recorder. Blake hit the rewind on his. They were able to find the scene pretty quickly.

“You go first,” Hunter said.

“Here goes,” Blake said.

Hunter’s voice. Then the silence. And then—

The growl was so much louder on the digital recorder than it had been on the camera. Almost to the point where it made Hunter jump. And then the growl was followed by a voice. Faint and distant.

“Help meeeee,” it whispered.

“No way, dude,” Hunter said. “That’s crazy.”

“I’ve got chills, man,” Blake said, holding out his forearm. “What do you think that was?”

“There were two voices there, weren’t there?” Hunter said.

“Yeah.”

“I think I have a pretty good idea of what made that growl,” Hunter said. “I’ll show you after we go through the rest of this stuff.”

Hunter was overcome with pride.

The crew had captured their first EVP and he knew that it was only the beginning of all the juicy evidence they had unearthed.

Chapter 17

The Ouija board session was next. They watched themselves sitting on the sand, hunched over the board, asking questions. After a while the planchette started moving. Hunter's voice called out the "M-I-N-E" the entity had spelled on the board.

And then they heard a voice that didn't belong to Hunter or Blake. It was muffled and hard to hear and no matter how loud Hunter turned up the volume, they couldn't make out what it was saying.

Hunter's entire body turned to wet chicken skin just hearing it. It was deep and thick and dripping with darkness. It sounded like something out of the movies, when they wanted to distort speech. Like when a kidnapper was trying to disguise his voice on the phone or something.

Hunter grabbed the digital recorder out of Blake's hand and frantically searched for that exact spot. He finally found it and turned up the volume.

The words shook him to his very core. He could understand them now. To Hunter they sounded like pure evil.

"You're miiinnnnne," the voice growled.

Hunter looked over at Blake. His mouth was hanging open.

"That was a Grade A EVP right there, man," Hunter said slowly. "Wow."

"Jeez," Blake said, putting his hand up to his mouth. "That was crazy."

"Wait until you see the next segment," Hunter said.

A minute later they heard Austin's bloodcurdling scream.

"Wait, Hunter!" Blake's voice echoed. "Wait up."

"Ass munch," Blake muttered.

"Dude, just wait. I'm telling you, it's worth it," Hunter said.

Back on the screen, Hunter found Austin lying on the ground. A few moments later, the camera was pointing down the narrow tunnel back toward where Blake was.

"See, dude, I wanted to wait for you, but..." Hunter started saying but trailed off.

This was the part he had been waiting for. The part that was going to document the actual existence of ghosts. The part he had been waiting to review since the minute they'd gotten back. The thing he'd unconsciously and consciously been waiting to find ever since falling down in the well all those years ago.

His voice echoed as he called out to his friend. And then, "Oh, my God."

"This is it!" Hunter shouted to Blake.

But the camera didn't show anything. Just second after second after second of darkness.

There was no black shadow. No lumbering creature. No nothing. Just the empty tunnel. No evidence of anything unusual at all.

And then the camera turned away swiftly and shook and jostled as Hunter dragged Austin away to the mouth of the mine. And that was it.

Now it was Hunter's turn to sit there with his mouth hanging open.

It couldn't be. It just couldn't be.

It had all been so clear. He knew he had been rolling film the entire time that thing was coming toward him.

He hadn't imagined it. The black shadow had been real. He would have sworn it on a stack of Bibles.

But the camera showed nothing.

Hunter quickly rewound it and watched the whole scene unfold again. Same thing. Nothing. Hunter just sounded like a maniac during the segment, screaming as he looked down the empty mine shaft.

"That can't be..." he said out loud. "There was something there. You have to believe me."

"You sure you didn't just imagine it?" Blake asked. "I mean, it was pretty creepy down there and I'm sure that, you know, your eyes play tricks and all that."

"I didn't imagine it!" Hunter shouted. "It was this shadow creature and it was coming after me and I was filming the whole time. It was right there!"

He pointed wildly to the screen.

"Well, it's not showing up on camera, so you know, I want to believe you, but..."

Hunter just shook his head.

"That just really sucks, man," he said. "I saw it. With my own two eyes."

He looked over at Blake but he could tell he wasn't buying it.

"I believe you *think* you saw something," Blake said. "But I can't see it. Therefore, I can't afford to believe it."

"What are you talking about, man?" Hunter said. "You're talking like some super lame guy. *You can't afford to believe it?*"

Hunter hated it when Blake tried to sound like an adult. It especially bugged him now.

"I'm just saying that we're paranormal investigators and that the whole idea of this is to capture evidence. And this—"

Blake stood up and pointed at the television, at the dark and empty tunnel on the screen.

"*This* doesn't capture anything," he said.

"Well, it was there. That's all I can tell you. There was this shadow creature crawling down the tunnel after me. Maybe you can't afford to believe it, but that's what I saw."

Blake sighed.

"I'm going home, man. You can review the rest of the footage on your own. I'm pretty sure there's nothing else there."

"Hey! What about the EVP's we captured? That was *something*," Hunter said. "And the Ouija board? The way it moved like that?"

Hunter was getting frustrated. He was alone on this.

"Yeah, those were cool. But I don't know, man. They can be explained away. Were those really voices or just normal noises we heard? They could go either way. And for all anyone knows, you might have been moving the Ouija board pointer yourself." Blake sighed. "I guess I was just expecting more."

"Like the ghost of your dead grandfather?"

He knew the story almost as well as Blake did. He'd never shut up about that story.

"Hey, no need to bring him into this just because this investigation turned lame," Blake said, grabbing his backpack.

"I saw it, man," Hunter muttered as Blake walked out the door. "It was there."

He sat there for a while going over the whole thing in his mind.

As much as he hated to admit it, Blake was right. In the world of paranormal investigations, you had to have more than just what you thought you saw in the dark. You had to have it documented. Sure, the EVP's and hocus pocus of the Ouija board might give you enough to

make an amateur documentary, but what you really needed to rise above the other paranormal investigators and ghost crews out there was evidence. Real, untarnished, documented evidence.

And Blake was right. What little evidence they had collected just wasn't gonna cut it.

Hunter sat there for a long time.

Chapter 18

School started the next day. Hunter was happy to finally be a sophomore. He wouldn't have to go through all those useless freshmen orientations. As he walked up the steps of the high school, he noticed the *frosh* huddled in groups, looking like a bunch of scared rabbits.

"Poor bastards," he mumbled, smiling.

He walked through the big, heavy doors. He scanned the crowd, looking for Blake. The plan had been to walk to school together, but Blake wasn't returning any of his text messages.

Hunter spotted Heidi. She was standing with a large group of girls, giggles and laughter erupting in all directions. Heidi was wearing a lot of makeup and looked older and taller than she had three months ago.

Hunter thought about going up to her and saying hi but the bell rang. He hoped that she was in one of his classes that day.

After watching her disappear down the hall, Hunter went back to looking for Blake. If he was there, he had become as invisible as the creature in the cave.

Hunter's first two classes were chemistry and English, and he thought he might die of boredom. The excitement of the first day of school was no match for the mind-numbing dribble coming out of the teachers' mouths. He sat in the back, doodling on his notebook and looking up every once in a while at the broken clocks.

Lunch time. Finally.

Hunter ate with a group of guys he knew from way back in elementary school. They talked about their classes and what they did during the summer. At one point the conversation turned to why Heidi Wyatt and the Josh Crowder had broken up. The rumor making the rounds was that Josh had dumped her, though nobody could figure out why.

"It's a mystery," Phillip said. "A real conundrum."

Hunter acted disinterested.

After the bell rang, he dragged himself to history class. He plopped down at a desk and looked for Blake. They had compared schedules the week before and he knew for a fact that he was supposed to be in this class. Still no Blake. Hunter checked his phone to see if he had left a message but there was nothing.

Suddenly Hunter looked up and saw Heidi walk in. His mouth dried up like a desert going through a bad drought. She seemed to be without her usual entourage of friends and looked kind of unsure. Like maybe she was in the wrong class or something.

She pulled out a folded piece of paper and looked at it. Then she took a seat in the front row. Hunter sighed.

A short, stodgy man with thick glasses and a stream of sweat running down the side of his face walked in. He took roll and started droning on about local Nevada history and the importance of knowing the past so as not to repeat the same mistakes.

Hunter lost interest at about the 27-second mark. There were some wide bodies between him and the front of the room, so even if he had wanted to stare at the back of Heidi's head—which he did—he was out of luck.

He went back to doodling. But that too was getting old. Eventually he opened up the thick American history book and started looking at the pictures. The American Revolution. Westward

Expansion. The Civil War. The Old West. The photos were all old and faded. The black and white images showed people dressed in old-fashioned clothing, staring past the camera. Hunter had always thought there was something haunting about those old photos, the way that people back then never smiled at the camera. They always looked so serious, trapped in another time.

Hunter kept flipping through the pages. A drop of sweat splattered down on one of the photos. It was hot in the classroom. So hot. And it would probably be this way clear through November. The teacher kept talking and Hunter began to get sleepy. Very sleepy.

And then he saw it.

It was one of the photographs in the book. The man had a thick beard and was dressed in those old time clothes, looking out into the infinite distance. It was just like all the other pictures, and yet there was something different about it. Something in the man's eyes.

They seemed to be staring right up at Hunter. Like they were alive or something. It took Hunter by surprise for a moment. There was something very odd about the man. All Hunter could do was stare back at the book, like he was in a trance.

Hunter finally pulled himself away long enough to read the caption.

"Pictured left: J. Sanders, a prospector from Michigan, found silver in the hills of southern Nevada."

Out of it as he was, it took Hunter a moment to place the name. J. Sanders. *Joseph Sanders*. It was—

"Young man?"

Hunter looked up. The teacher was staring at him. In fact, the entire class was staring at him. Including Heidi, who had actually turned around 180 degrees and was leaning over in her seat just to look at him.

Hunter realized that the teacher had been asking him a question.

"Uh," he said, swallowing hard and looking around for help. "What, uh, what was the question?"

"We're going around introducing ourselves," the teacher said. "I asked you what your name was, young man."

"Uh, I'm Hunter. Hunter Saracen," he said, looking in Heidi's direction.

She suddenly looked bored.

"And what did you do this summer, Hunter," the teacher asked.

"What did I do?" Hunter said.

The teacher sighed.

"Yes. That's the second part of introducing yourself. Half the class has already answered this question in half the time it's taken you to get through your name."

Hunter felt his cheeks grow hot.

"I got some new video games," Hunter said.

The teacher raised his eyebrows, like he was waiting for Hunter to say more.

"And I went ghost hunting at a mine with my best friend, Blake."

The words just came out. *Video games and ghost hunting*. That really sounded lame.

Just to emphasize that point, someone in the front let out a loud snort. Hunter wished at that moment that the thing in the mine had gotten him. Then he wouldn't have to be here, dying this slow death by humiliation.

He wasn't sure how it happened. He usually kept his ghost obsession to himself, and didn't tell too many kids at school about it. But somehow, the words came tumbling out, like some sort of pathetic confession.

“Interesting,” the teacher said smugly before moving on to another student.

Hunter’s glazed eyes looked at Heidi again. She smirked at him for a second and looked away, shaking her head.

He might as well have a giant L stamped on his forehead.

I’m such a loser! he screamed inside his brain.

The next student said he went to China for three weeks during the summer. The teacher looked super impressed and started asking all sorts of questions.

Hunter sighed.

Chapter 19

Hunter had nearly forgotten about the old photo in the musty history book when his last class of the day came around. He reread the sentence over and over.

He skimmed the rest of the pages in the chapter but there was no mention of Joseph Sanders.

It couldn't just be a coincidence, Hunter thought. Sanders wasn't that common of a name. And there was something about the man staring up from the photo. Something frighteningly familiar.

He just kept staring down at that face. The man's eyes. The beard and mustache, drooping down his fa—

Hunter's mouth dropped open. Suddenly, something red was spilling out of Joseph Sanders' eyes. Blood. Spilling out like there was no tomorrow, soaking the page bright red. Then the man's face started twisting into a horrible expression. His mouth opened wide and Hunter heard a haunted scream coming from the photo.

"Help *meeeeee!*" it yelled.

Hunter wanted to scream, too.

He couldn't believe it. It was all so real. All so real.

"Hey, man, you look like you've seen a ghost," a voice said from behind. "It must be all that ghost hunting you're doing."

Hunter turned around. Tommy Reynolds, one of the jocks from his history class, was towering over him, grinning from ear to ear.

Hunter looked back down at the photograph, expecting to see the blood dripping off the desk and onto the floor. But everything was normal. Old Sanders was still staring up from the book with those beady eyes, but that was it. The blood was gone. Like it had never been there.

Hunter shook his head. Had his tired mind played a trick on him? He had imagined the whole thing. That was the only logical explanation. But ghost explorers can't be slaves to the logic of the living.

He looked back up at Tommy but couldn't think of a comeback.

Tommy squeezed into the desk next to Hunter, slamming down his geometry textbook. Hunter jumped.

"This is gonna be a fun year, eh, buddy?" Tommy said, an evil glint in his eye.

Chapter 20

Was Joseph Sanders the shadow creature he had seen coming after him in the cave?

It was possible. A good ghost hunter had to keep his mind open to any possibility. But Hunter didn't think so. The man in the picture didn't seem to have the kind of malice and evil that the mine thing was packing.

Hunter concluded that the spirit of Joseph Sanders was a victim in all this. And that as terrifying as the bleeding photo had been, it was a cry for help.

Hunter knew a little something about being a victim. He had barely survived the first day of school. At this rate there would be nothing left of him by Thanksgiving. Maybe even Halloween. Hell, he'd be lucky if he lived to see Columbus Day. He wondered if Tommy Reynolds knew something he didn't.

Hunter had to talk to Blake.

He pulled out his phone as he walked home and found a message from Blake.

Finally.

"Sick. U C Heidi?" it read.

So that was why he hadn't seen Blake all day.

Hunter responded quickly.

Coming over. Found something. Saw her. Lame.

He stuffed his phone down in his jean pockets and readjusted his backpack. In the distance he heard the football players yelling as they did one of their drills. He wondered if Heidi would like him better if he was out there cracking skulls instead of chasing down a man that had been dead for over a century.

No doubt.

Chapter 21

"H, what made you say that in front of the whole class?" Blake said in a stuffy voice. "Not much thinking going on there, telling everyone that you went ghost hunting this summer."

"Well, it just sort of came out," Hunter said. "Like mental diarrhea or something. Maybe you're not the only one who's sick."

"I'll stick with my cold," Blake said. "Your disease sounds terminal."

"I know. I mean I know that being a ghost hunter on TV is the coolest thing in the world. But there's a fine line. And we're on the other side of that line. I mean, people look at wannabe ghost adventurers as, well, like they looked at me in class today."

Blake propped his legs up on the coffee table. He was sitting on the sofa, surrounded by a pile of used tissues. He had a striped scarf wrapped around his neck even though it had to be at least 90 degrees in the house. His face was red and when he talked his voice came out all muffled.

"Well, when you're famous, you can laugh about it," he said. "Until then though, you best stop spilling your guts. You'd be better off sharing your teddy bear."

"You're right," Hunter said, sighing. "That was plain dumb. No two ways about it. And the worst part of it was that Heidi was right there to hear it."

"Ouch," Blake said, wiping his nose with a tissue and following it with a loud intake of snot.

"Yeah. And for just a moment there, right before my head left my body—or maybe it was *after* my head left my body—I was idiot enough to believe that she might have actually thought it was cool that I was a ghost hunter."

Hunter didn't want to think about it anymore. Besides, he had to tell Blake about the photo. He pulled the history book from his backpack."

"C'mon, man," Blake sighed. "It's too soon for homework."

"No, look," Hunter said, holding the book open.

"You think this is our Joseph Sanders?" Blake said a moment later.

"Got to be," Hunter said. "And that's not all. Earlier I saw something in the photo. Something..."

He trailed off, unsure of how to describe it.

"What'd you see?" Blake asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I... I don't know exactly," Hunter said. "I thought I saw Sanders crying for help."

Blake gulped loudly.

"Do you think this was the ghost that you saw in the cave?"

"Oh, so now you believe me?"

"Well, I was thinking about it. And I was thinking that it is entirely possible that you saw something in there. I mean, that's why the existence of ghosts is so hard to prove, right? Because they don't show up on film like you and me."

"You weren't so sure about that yesterday," Hunter said.

"Well, today's a new day," Blake said, wiping his runny nose. "So what do you think all of this means?"

"Well," Hunter said. "I have a theory."

He had been thinking about it on the walk over to Blake's house, trying to figure out what was going on in the mine, and he thought he'd come to a pretty good conclusion.

“You know how we heard those two different voices in the mine?” Hunter said. “There was that dark and ominous one and then the other one that said, *help me?*”

“Yeah. I remember,” Blake said.

“Well, I think what we have here is a case of one spirit being trapped by another evil spirit. What I think is that Joseph Sanders was killed by something in the mine—an evil entity or whatever—and Sanders’ spirit has been trapped ever since.”

“So then the black shadow you saw in the mine is the evil presence that killed Sanders?” Blake said.

“Yes, and I think that it has been keeping the soul of Sanders prisoner all these years.”

Blake shook his head.

“Wow, you really think that all that is going on in there, and for so long?”

“I do,” Hunter said. “You remember what the guidebook said? About how the miners thought there was an evil being in the mine?”

“Yeah,” Blake nodded.

“Well, I think that evil being’s been holding Sanders hostage,” Hunter said. “And I think Sanders is trying to get our attention so we can help free him.”

“Wow,” Blake said, his eyes wide. “So... how are we going to free him then?”

Hunter smiled, happy that Blake was onboard. It had taken a while, but he had finally gotten over being abandoned in the mine. And more importantly, he seemed to believe in what Hunter had seen there.

“Go back,” Hunter whispered.

The thought made his insides quiver like boiled spaghetti.

But what he had seen in the book was no coincidence. It wasn’t random. Something had guided Hunter to that page. He was meant to find that photo.

Sanders had meant for him to find it.

Blake looked over at Hunter, fear in his eyes.

“It’ll be like a two-part episode,” Hunter said, trying to make it sound as positive as possible. “Like a follow-up investigation.”

“And how are we gonna get back there?” Blake asked. “I don’t think your mom’s gonna let you go back there.”

“Well...” Hunter said.

He hadn’t thought that part through yet. There was no way Austin was going to drive them again. And Blake was right, his mom was gonna have a major freak out if he told her that he wanted to go back there.

“I think your plan is dead in the water,” Blake said a minute later. “No ride, no cigar.”

He sounded relieved.

But at that moment a car full of cigars hit Hunter between the eyes.

“Hey, your birthday’s in a couple of weeks, isn’t it?” he said, grinning.

“No way, man,” Blake said, catching where Hunter was going. “You’re out of your mind with that one.”

“C’mon. I know that your dad promised you the Honda when you turn 16. I would drive if I had a car and a license. But the earliest that would happen would be in December. We can’t leave Sanders hanging till then.”

“There’s no way I’m driving out on the highway for 90 minutes,” Blake said. “And that’s just one way. You’re nuts.”

“C’mon, dude. I’ll even drive if you just get the car.”

“You don’t even have your license,” Blake said. “And I’m not risking you wrecking the Honda.”

This wasn’t working. Hunter had planted the seed. Maybe that was enough for now. Maybe Blake would water it—with his mucus or something—and it would sprout and reach for the sky. Or at least for the car keys.

“Okay,” Hunter said. “Don’t decide right now. Just think about it. Think about poor Sanders. And think about our futures as paranormal investigators.”

Blake blew his nose.

Chapter 22

The dream again. The same one.

Hunter, staring up from the watery blackness, staring up at the world he would never see again. He tried to stay afloat. Felt around the slimy walls of the well, finding nothing to hold on to. Nothing to grip.

He screamed. He choked. He sputtered. None of it seemed to matter. Nobody heard his fear.

And then the thing grabbed him. It wrapped around his ankles and pulled him under. He choked on the rancid water that filled his lungs.

The fingers—or whatever they were—burned into his flesh as they pulled him down. Down, down, down under the slimy water. And then they were under the well, inside the earth. Fire all around.

Hunter woke up. He couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs. Streams of sweat rolled down his face.

He reached over and turned on the light. Squinting, he drank deeply from the glass that had been on the nightstand. Strangely enough, the nightmares always filled him with an almost unquenchable thirst. Hunter nicknamed the condition "Dead Man's Tongue" because it was always how he felt after one of these nightmares.

He looked over at the time. 3:01. The nightmares always hit at this hour. In the deepest, darkest part of the night.

Hunter was about to turn on the TV to help him get back to sleep when he heard a loud crash from somewhere in the house.

His heart suddenly started beating faster, much faster than it or Hunter would have liked. The rest of him sat there frozen, listening.

What was that noise?

It sounded like it was coming from the kitchen. Austin digging around for a midnight snack? Hunter didn't think it was their mom. Once she got to sleep, she was out until morning.

Probably nothing to worry about, Hunter thought, putting the empty glass back down on the nightstand. Austin was known to eat enormous quantities of food, especially around football season. That was probably it. Mystery solved.

But then Hunter heard the noise again. It was louder this time. Like a dish crashing.

Hunter sat completely still, holding his breath.

That had to be more than Austin out there. Austin could be self-centered and loud sometimes, but this was too much. Something else was going on.

What if someone had broken in? Hunter thought of his mom. He had to protect her. He had to be brave and go out there. He had to man up.

Even though he didn't want to—he really didn't want to—Hunter got up.

He walked over to the closet on shaky legs and got his old baseball bat. Then he slowly opened his bedroom door and walked down the hall.

Hunter heard another noise. But this time it sounded like a whimper followed by a faint voice. "Please, help me..." it said.

Was that Austin?

A horrible smell hit Hunter halfway down the hall. It reminded him of when the next door neighbor's house had gotten egged last summer and the smell of rotting chicken embryos lingered in the air for days.

The kitchen was dark. The smell got worse when Hunter walked in. It had to be coming from in here. He hit the light switch but nothing happened. The bulb must have burned out, Hunter thought.

He looked at all the shadows, trying to figure out what had made the noise.

And then he saw something shiny on the floor.

It was a knife. A large knife. The one his mom used to cut through cheap cuts of tough meat. What was it doing out in the middle of the floor, away from all the counters, the razor-sharp end pointing toward Hunter?

Hunter started walking over to it.

And then suddenly the knife moved. It flew across the floor toward him, shooting sparks off the tiles. It came to a screeching halt an inch away from Hunter's bare feet.

A scream got caught in Hunter's throat as he looked down at the smiling knife.

A moment later he heard a voice again. But it wasn't the cry for help.

Dark and full of hate, it was the voice of evil. Like what it would sound like if rattlesnakes could scream.

"YOU'RE MINE!" it hissed.

Hunter felt dizzy. He was about to run off screaming when the lights went on.

He was blinded for a moment and then saw the outline of his mom standing at the opposite end of the kitchen. Hunter rubbed his eyes.

"What are you doing out here in the dark, Hunter?" she said, looking down at the knife at his feet. "Were you sleepwalking?"

She picked it up and returned it to the wooden block holder next to the stove.

"I don't know," Hunter said. "I don't thin—"

"Oh, my God!" she suddenly yelled. "The gas is on!"

She flipped back the knobs on the stove to the off positions and started opening windows.

"Damn it, Hunter," she said, pushing past him. "We could have been killed."

"Mom, it wasn't me," he said, following her into the living room.

She started swinging the front door back and forth to blow in the cool night air. Hunter looked around in disbelief.

Had he been sleep walking? Had he been playing with a knife? Did he turn on the gas?

But he had heard the noise. He had smelled something from the hall, long before reaching the kitchen. He had seen the knife move across the floor. It couldn't have been him.

And what about that horrible voice, whispering those same words they had captured on the digital recorder in the mine? Had he really just dreamed up the whole thing?

"Who else could it have been?" his mom said.

"What's going on out here?" Austin said, yawning. "What's that, gas?"

Their mom didn't answer. She just stared at Hunter.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," she finally said. "Everybody get back to bed."

It didn't matter if she didn't believe him. Hunter knew the truth.

Something had followed him home that day. The thing in the cave was here with him.

He knew he had to find a way to get back there and finish what he had started. To help Sanders and send the thing that was now haunting him back to Hell.

Chapter 23

"I don't think your obsession with ghosts is healthy," his mom said the next morning before school. "I think maybe it has something to do with what happened last night. Anyway, Hunter, you need to find some other activities. Not just TV and video games. Until you do, I want you to start spending some time with Austin and his friends."

What? Had she gone nuts!

Austin just smiled at him. Like he was earning serious brownie points by helping out his basket case of a brother. Points that would probably give him access to the car pretty much anytime he snapped his fingers.

Hunter hated Austin's friends. They were so... so Cro-Magnon. Primitive life forms that should have died off before the last ice age. At least their tiny brains had. But that was little consolation.

"Austin's agreed to bring you along when he goes out with his friends," she went on. "It's settled and I don't want to hear any backtalk on the subject."

Hunter was about to give her some anyway, but then he saw the look in her eye.

She meant it.

Hunter decided to play along. Who knows? If he said he wouldn't do it, she might send him to a psychologist or something. He couldn't afford to be fitted for a strait jacket. Not now. Not with so much left to do. He would lay low and hang out with Austin if that's what it took to get her off his back.

He couldn't let anything stop him. There was too much at stake.

Blake would understand. Hunter couldn't wait to tell him about what happened in the kitchen. Maybe it would help convince him to drive them back to the cave.

He was supposed to be back at school but when he walked into his history class, Hunter still hadn't seen him.

He sat down and waited, watching the door.

The teacher walked in and started writing something on the board. Hunter stared at the back of his head. He knew it was too early in the year to start praying for a sub. Still...

"He's not that bad, is he?" a voice said next to him.

Hunter looked over and just about stroked out.

It was Heidi.

She was sitting next to him. And talking to him.

Hunter sat straight up in his chair and then tried to resume his usual slouch. He tried to be cool, but inside lights and sirens were going off. He was having a serious meltdown.

"Yeah, so far he kinda is," he said, surprised that he was able to get the words out in the right order.

"What, because he woke you up from your slumber yesterday and didn't buy into your ghost nonsense?" Heidi said, glancing at her manicured nails.

Hunter cleared his throat.

"It's not nonsense," he said. "And I don't really care what Mr. Pettis thinks. What does he know about ghost hunting anyway?"

"Well, it sounds like a bunch of mumbo jumbo to me," she said.

“Mumbo jumbo?”

“You heard right, Ghost Boy. Anyway, I was wondering if what you do is similar to those *Ghost Adventures* guys,” Heidi said. “You know, like you go into haunted places and get locked down all night?”

Hunter looked over at her, surprised that she knew about the show.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what we do,” Hunter said, stretching the truth a little. “It’s not easy. It takes a lot of guts, you know.”

“Yeah. That Zak Bagans guy sure is dreamy, isn’t he?” she said. “All those muscles.”

Hunter had no idea how to respond to that. Zak was his hero for sure, but he didn’t think of him as dreamy. He was brave and tortured sometimes. And he was strong.

“Jeez, I don’t know,” he said after a pause. “I guess. If you’re a girl, maybe.”

Then something hit him. Heidi had thought about it. Thought about him. Enough to be sitting next to him, talking to him. Enough to give him a nickname. Okay, *Ghost Boy* was lame. But that wasn’t the point. She had thought about him and given him a nickname. That was the point. He existed in her eyes. She saw him. He wasn’t a ghost boy, regardless of what she said. He was there. Sitting right next to her. And she saw him!

And another thought: if Heidi thought Zak was dreamy or whatever, maybe she could one day think of Hunter the same way. All Hunter needed was a TV show. And muscles. He was halfway there—as far as the TV show went. Well, maybe not quite halfway. He had some footage anyway.

“What are you two talking about?” Blake said, taking a seat on the other side of Hunter.

Maybe his ears were still clogged from his cold, but it felt to Hunter like he had shouted it.

“Oh, just about how Zak Bagans has so many muscles,” Heidi said in an equally loud voice.

Hunter was sure that everyone in the room had heard. There were a few snickers to back him up.

“Now it all makes sense,” Tommy Reynolds said from across the room. “Hunter’s in love with Zak Bagans.”

The snickers turned to a full-blown uproar. Everyone was either giggling or laughing, including Heidi.

Hunter’s carcass turned bright red.

“All right, all right,” the teacher said. “Settle down. In any case, I don’t think it’s any of our business where someone decides to invest their affection.”

That brought on more laughter.

Invest their affection? What was that supposed to mean?

Hunter went all Charlie Brown.

Good grief!

Chapter 24

“Dude, I have to talk to you,” Blake said after the bell rang.

“I have to talk to you, too,” Hunter said.

They walked slowly through the midafternoon heat. Blake seemed odd. His eyes looked cartoonish and large. But he didn’t say anything.

“So, what’s up?” Hunter finally said.

“Well, I don’t know how to explain it exactly,” Blake said, out of breath. “But I think, I think there’s something going on.”

“What do you mean, *something going on*?”

“Something happened last night,” Blake said, stumbling into the curb and almost falling down as they crossed the street.

“Well, are you gonna tell me, or do I have to guess?”

“It was a dream.”

“A dream?”

“Yeah, I mean, it was a dream but it was so real,” Blake said, shaking his head. “I’ve never had a dream like that before. In my entire life.”

Hunter noticed that Blake was pale. It could have been his illness but unless a cold had drained all the blood from his body, Hunter suspected it was something more.

“What was it about?” Hunter said, slowing down.

“Well, I know it sounds crazy, but I dreamt about that guy, you know, Joseph Sanders,” Blake said.

“Yeah?” Hunter said, raising his eyebrows.

“Well, in the dream—if that’s what it was—he was coming up through the floor in my bedroom,” Blake said, looking hard at the ground. “And he spoke to me.”

Hunter stopped walking. His blood ran cold. The image of a ghost coming up through the floorboards was enough to scare anyone. Hunter remembered the photo in the book. Those eyes. The eyes of Sanders. His spine tingled. He felt feverish.

“What’d he say?” Hunter said, looking over at Blake.

“He, he said that he was trapped. And that he needed our help. That we were the only ones who could set him free.”

“Are you serious?” Hunter said.

“Yeah, man. As serious as you are about Heidi,” Blake said. “Or Zak Bagans.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hunter said, raising his voice.

He didn’t wait for a response. He shoved Blake in the shoulder. Blake went flying off the sidewalk, stumbling and almost falling backward into the street.

“What’d you do that for, man?” he said, rubbing his shoulder.

Hunter didn’t answer.

“Anyway, it didn’t feel like a dream,” Blake said. “And I’m not the nightmare type. If anything, you’re the one who seems to have chicken feathers in your DNA. Lest I remind you of what happened at the mine?”

“All right, all right. Can we just move past that already?” Hunter said. “So, you really think it was all real or something? That Joseph Sanders spoke to you?”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Blake said. “I’ve never had a dream like that. Like I said, it felt so real. As real as the two of us standing out here right now.”

“Something happened to me last night, too,” Hunter said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“What was it?”

Hunter told Blake about the noises and the voices. And the knife on the floor, flying toward him in the dark. And the stove being on.

“Are you sure you weren’t dreaming?” Blake asked after Hunter finished.

“No, I know I wasn’t dreaming. And I know I was awake during the whole thing because I had just had another episode of my well nightmare. I was sitting in bed, wide awake when the noises started.”

He shook his head.

“But now my mom says that it’s because I’ve become obsessed with the paranormal that I’m suddenly sleepwalking and having nightmares,” Hunter said. “And she wants Austin to babysit me.”

“What do you mean, babysit?”

“She says I have to hang out with him and his caveman clan until I, uh, basically get a life.”

“Not cool, man,” Blake said. “Not cool.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So you really think that it was the evil thing from the mine that did that?” Blake said.

The boys turned a corner and started down Mapleton Street. Hunter could see the dancing, mirage-like swirls of heat bouncing off the asphalt in the distance.

“I think so,” Hunter said. “What else could it be?”

Blake was silent for a moment.

“So are we going to help ol’ Sanders escape from this evil bastard or what?” Hunter asked as they approached Blake’s house.

Blake looked over at Hunter and sighed.

“I don’t think we have any choice. Either we help him or that evil thing might end up killing you. And then come after me.”

“Or the other way around,” Hunter said.

“Hey, it was your house it tried to blow up,” Blake said. “But, okay, let’s not get distracted and lose sight of the goal.”

“So does that mean we can take your car,” Hunter said, feeling hopeful. “That you’ll drive us there?”

Blake’s face turned even whiter. He gulped loudly and then finally gave the slightest of nods.

Hunter grinned freakishly.

“Good,” Hunter said. “This is gonna be awesome, Blakey. You won’t be sorry.”

“My dad’s right,” Blake said.

“About what?”

“He says that I’m always letting myself get talked into stupid things,” he said, sighing.

“Dude, it’s not gonna be stupid. It’s going to be awesome. It’ll be like those Ghost Adventures when they return to a place where they’ve already done a previous investigation. Like the one at that music place in Kentucky, remember? I mean, we’re gonna save Sanders. And we’re gonna send that thing back to Hell—where it belongs. We’re gonna be heroes, man.”

Hunter wasn’t sure how they were going to do these things. But he knew it had to start back at the mine.

“Yeah,” Blake said, his jaw clenched in a death grip with the rest of his skull. “Heroes.”

He gave Hunter a small, shaky thumbs up before turning up his driveway.

“All right, then,” Hunter said.

“Hey, have you thought of how you’re going to survive until I get my license?” Blake said, stopping. “I mean, not getting blown up and stabbed and the like?”

Hunter shook his head and smiled.

It was a good question.

Chapter 25

Two weeks is a long time to kill. Especially when something is trying to kill you.

The school days dragged along like a wooden leg trailing behind an old pirate. At least there were no more incidents in history class. No Heidi drawing him into some weird Zak Bagans muscle conversation or Tommy Reynolds cracking wise on the subject. And no more blood coming out of Joseph Sanders' eyes.

Sanders didn't pay them anymore night visits. And neither did the evil one.

Hunter spent most of the time glued to his laptop, cutting and editing the first episode of *Spirit Hunters*, which is what his ghost hunting show was going to be called. He took the scariest parts of the trip to the mine and the EVPs they had recorded and put it them all together. Then he and Blake filmed a post-investigation commentary, where they talked about what they saw—and, sadly, what the camera wasn't able to capture.

They also included a summary of the things that had happened after they returned from the mine, namely Blake's dream and Hunter's encounter with the knife on the kitchen floor and the gas from the stove. They concluded that these were almost definite signs of a haunting. Definite signs that the ghosts from Sanders Mine had followed them home.

When they had finished, Hunter put the final version on YouTube. But the story wouldn't really be finished until they returned to the mine. That part of the investigation would make up Part Two.

Hunter had a strong feeling that whatever they came back with would put *Spirit Hunters* on the paranormal map. He was convinced that they were going to capture something that would make his mom's concern about his "unhealthy" obsession with the paranormal worth it. He would show her. Hunter was going to show them all.

Strangely enough, Hunter eagerly waited for the ghosts to return at night. As terrifying as the original visitation had been, he still wanted them to provide more pieces of the puzzle.

But the nights were oddly quiet. He didn't even dream about the well.

Hunter's days fell into a dull routine. Getting up early, doodling and trying to stay awake in school, daydreaming of Heidi, hanging out with Blake, going home, doing homework, having dinner with his mom and Austin, doing more homework, more daydreaming of Heidi, going to bed. And starting it all again the next day.

He tried to find more information on Joseph Sanders. But he didn't come up with anything new.

Finally, after a week of nothing happening, Hunter decided to shake things up. If Sanders wasn't going to come to Hunter, Hunter was going to go to him. In a manner of speaking.

It was a Thursday evening, and it had started getting cold at night. During the day it was still be as hot as it ever was, but the temperatures plummeted in the evening.

It was a perfect night for a séance, Hunter thought.

He had read about séances in books and seen them performed in a few old movies. They were meant to contact the dead and often involved a psychic or medium.

Hunter wasn't either one of those things. But he did have the Ouija board. And that had to count for something.

He texted Blake, telling him to meet him at his house.

It would be a good night for it. Hunter's mom was working late and Austin was at football practice. Peace and quiet. Peace and quiet and ghosts, Hunter hoped. Just the *Spirit Hunters* team and old Joseph Sanders, with perhaps a special guest appearance by the evil spirit. Maybe.

The more he thought about the creature, that evil thing that haunted the mine, the more it made him angry. What right did this thing have to trap Sanders' spirit down there? What right did it have to torment the living and the dead?

Blake responded to Hunter's text, saying he had a lot of homework to do.

"This is way more important than HW," Hunter wrote back. "Way more."

Blake broke down and wrote that he would come over.

Hunter went to his room and got the Ouija board. It was still dusty from that day in the mine. Then he went to his mom's bathroom and grabbed some candles and matches that were along the bathtub and brought everything to the dining room table. He didn't know exactly what part the candles would play, but he figured they couldn't hurt. In the movies, séances were almost always conducted with lit candles around the table.

Hunter set up the digital camera on its tripod, framing the table.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, the doorbell rang. Hunter let Blake in. He was red in the face after the trek to Hunter's house.

"This better be good. I have a chemistry test tomorrow," he said.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, dude," Hunter said, leading him to the dining room. "It will be worth it."

Blake's eyes got wide when he saw the Ouija board surrounded by the candles.

"I don't know about this," he said, backing away. "Last time we used that, some pretty crazy things started happening. Remember what happened to your brother?"

"I know," Hunter said. "Which is why we have to use it again. I think we have a real good shot at talking to Sanders with it."

"Or the other thing," Blake said, almost whispering. "The evil, uh, one."

"Maybe. But I'm sick of waiting. I want to talk to them."

"Well, I don't want to get hit in the head like Austin," Blake said.

"You won't get hit in the head," Hunter said. "At least not by ol' Joe Sanders. I can't speak for the other spirit."

Blake stuck out his bottom lip, pouting like he was back in kindergarten.

"Fine," he said after a long pause, taking a seat at the table. "Let's see where this goes."

"That's the spirit," Hunter said, smiling at his own pun.

He turned the lights out and pressed record on the camera. Then he took a seat at the table. The candle flames flickered and swayed, casting uneven shadows on the walls. It reminded Hunter of Halloween back when he and Austin were kids. Before the divorce, when their dad used to read them scary stories at night by candlelight. Hunter always remembered the smell of the candle wax mixed with the feeling of fear. That was before he fell in the well, and learned what real fear felt like.

Hunter placed his hand on the planchette. Blake reluctantly followed. Hunter looked up and saw the fright in Blake's eyes.

Hunter cleared his throat.

"Why are you trapped, Sanders?" he said. "Tell us why."

Hunter closed his eyes, waiting for that strange feeling he had felt back in the mine. The strange magnetic pull of the wooden planchette across the board.

But it didn't happen. Hunter waited a few more seconds. Still nothing.

Maybe that was a touchy subject for ol' Joe.

"Why are you following us?" Hunter said, changing the subject.

Still nothing.

He cracked open an eye, sneaking a peak across the table at Blake. He looked back at Hunter, raising an eyebrow. No longer looking so scared.

"Dude, it'll work," Hunter said. "Just give it a minute."

"I've got a test tomorrow, so unless something happens in the—"

Suddenly, the planchette started moving.

"Stop, man," Blake said, watching it glide across the board. "I know it's you."

"No, it's not," Hunter said.

And it wasn't. It was that same strange magnetic pull that had been there in the cave. Moving across the board.

Hunter watched wide-eyed at the letters it was spelling.

M...

I...

N...

E.

The same word as before.

Hunter furrowed his brow.

"You want us to go back to the mine, don't you?" he said.

It was all beginning to make sense now. This wasn't the spirit of Sanders they were communicating with. It was the creature, the thing that had Sanders' soul chained down in that mine. The evil spirit that haunted the place.

Just like Hunter had thought, they still had unfinished business there.

"Were you the shadow creature that came after me?" Hunter asked, remembering the thick fear he had felt in his throat as the scrambling thing was coming toward him down the shaft.

He remembered the fear but felt no shame over it now. He was only human. He broke the first rule of ghost hunting, but he had lived to make up for it another day. And that day was drawing near. He would do better next time.

"Are you a bad spirit?" he asked after a long pause.

"Don't ask that," Blake said.

"Why not?"

"I dunno. I just don't think it's a good idea. I mean, what if—"

Blake didn't finish the sentence but Hunter understood.

The planchette didn't move.

They waited again. Finally, Blake let out a sigh of relief.

Just then a giant gust of wind suddenly blew through the room, putting out all the candles and leaving them in complete darkness. Blake screamed. Hunter felt his spine turn to wet noodles.

There was a loud crash that sounded like it came from the kitchen.

"What was that?" Hunter said, getting up.

He felt around for the light switch. When he found it, he saw Blake down on the floor, moaning and clutching his knee.

"What the hell happened?"

"I hit my knee on the table," Blake cried.

"What was that noise?"

"I don't know," Blake said, gritting his teeth.

Hunter left Blake on the floor and went out in the kitchen. He checked the wooden block, wondering if the noise had come from a knife crashing to the floor again.

But the knives were all accounted for.

Hunter looked around, checking for anything that seemed out of place. Anything out of the ordinary.

And then he saw it.

It was the ceramic cross that hung over the entrance to the pantry. The one his mom had bought years ago at an arts and crafts show downtown. It had been up there so long, Hunter had almost forgotten about it. But it wasn't up there now.

The cross was lying on the kitchen floor. Cracked into several pieces.

Hunter's mouth dropped open. He went over and picked up some of the jagged pieces, looking at them and then up at where the cross had been hanging. The nail was still in the wall. It hadn't given out.

He inspected the broken chunks. The wire on the back was still secure, still attached at the ends to two of the larger pieces. The wire had held. There was only one explanation. One terrifying explanation.

The only way the cross could have fallen the way it did was if it had been knocked down by someone.

Or something.

Hunter shivered.

"Hunter, you should come out here and see this," Blake said from out in the dining room.

Hunter quickly placed the pieces of the broken cross in his hands down on the counter. He ran back into the dining room.

Blake was standing now, supporting himself on one of the dining room chairs. He was looking down at the table, his jaw almost touching his chest.

Hunter walked over. He was looked down at the Ouija board.

The planchette was resting on Yes.

"We had asked if it was a bad spirit," Blake said, his voice shaking. "Remember?"

Hunter nodded his head.

"But that's where it was before from the last ques—" Hunter started to say but then remembered.

The last thing that the board had spelled out was the e in the word mine. The e was fairly close to the word yes on the board, but it was too much of a coincidence.

"Are you sure it didn't just move there when you bumped into the table?" Hunter asked anyway.

"I guess it's possible," Blake said. "But I don't think so. I think we got the answer to our question. Hey, what was that crash?"

"You don't want to know, man," Hunter said, shaking his head.

"What was it?"

Hunter sighed and walked back toward the kitchen. Blake limped behind him.

"Look," he said, pointing at the broken pieces.

Blake let out a shriek.

"Oh, my God," he whispered. "It's the same answer, man. The same answer in another form. It's saying, 'Yes, yes, yes! Hell, yes, I'm evil!'"

Hunter ran back to the dining room and came back with the camera.

“In case you folks at home are wondering, this is what that loud noise was. It was this cross that fell from the wall.”

“This is too much,” Blake said, shaking his head. “It’s crazy.”

“I know,” Hunter said.

“I need to get home.”

He hobbled quickly past Hunter to the hallway and towards the front door.

“Hey, wait a second, man!”

But it was too late. Blake was already gone. Running. Running on one bad leg. Just like Hunter had run out of the mine.

Hunter sat back in front of the Ouija board.

Blake was right. This was crazy.

He suddenly heard the front door open. Blake, he thought.

“So you’ve come back, huh?” he called out.

“What?”

It was Hunter’s mom.

“Oh, no,” Hunter said.

This was going to be hard to explain.

Chapter 26

Hunter was sitting in Brogan Smith's living room.

He didn't want to be sitting there, surrounded by a bunch of Austin's thick-necked friends, laughing as they inhaled chips and pizza and soda while playing video games. He didn't want to be there at all.

But after the night before, when Hunter's mom came home and saw the candles, the Ouija board, and the broken cross, he didn't have any other choice than to hang out with Austin and his friends. She was making him follow his brother around. She was convinced that Hunter's dabbling in the paranormal could be solved by hanging out with some football players or something.

It was a super lame theory, but Hunter had to go along. He had fewer legs to stand on than Blake with his bad knee.

He needed to start doing what normal kids his age did, she had said.

So there he sat, not quite broken hearted. But surrounded by bad smells nonetheless. The cavemen grunted about football mostly.

Luckily, Hunter had had the foresight to bring his laptop. Otherwise, he would have been bored out of his mind.

At some point in the evening, Austin turned his attention to Hunter.

"C'mon, Bro. Take over for me for a moment," he said, handing him the control.

"Dude, it's all greasy," Hunter said, trying not to think of the germs that were shooting up his fingers.

Austin let out a loud belch and everyone laughed.

"Let me have the laptop while you play," he said.

"Wipe your filthy hands first," Hunter said.

Austin smeared his hands on Hunter's shirt and then grabbed the computer.

Hunter focused on the flashing lights of the TV screen. The game was some sort of military game, the kind he always enjoyed playing. So it made sense that he ended up beating Brogan badly in a head-to-head battle.

"Beginners luck," Brogan said, his narrowly-set, little eyes peeking out from under his Denver Broncos hat.

Hunter smiled.

"Wanna bet?"

Brogan scrunched up his nose and looked back at the screen, coming as close to a state of complete focus as was Broganly possible.

Hunter looked back at the screen. If there was something he knew he was good at it was video games. Video games and ghost hunting.

He played the next game like it didn't matter and beat Brogan again. The broken jock shot him a dirty look after Hunter shot his character full of holes. Hunter just smiled, starting to almost feel happy that his mom had forced him to come along with Austin.

Suddenly Austin started laughing, laughing at whatever was on the laptop screen.

"What?" Brogan said.

"*Spirit Hunters*, Hunter? Seriously?"

The muffled sound of Hunter's voice came through the laptop speakers. The opening credits of *Spirit Hunters* started rolling.

"We go to some of the scariest, most haunted places around, and we investigate if the stories are true..." Hunter's voice echoed.

"Hey!" Hunter said, lunging for the laptop. "Give it here!"

Austin had apparently been digging around some of the sites Hunter visited frequently and had pulled up the episode on *YouTube*.

Even though Hunter was enormously proud of his video, which already had 97 hits, he didn't want Austin and his friends to see it. Not here, like this. They just wouldn't get it and Hunter knew he would never hear the end of it.

"No, I wanna see," Austin said, pulling the laptop farther away from him.

Hunter tried to go after it again, but Brogan stood in his way.

"I wanna see, too," he said, his voice as thick as his neck.

"It's none of your business," Hunter said.

"I think it is my business," Austin said. "I'm the one that drove you guys and hit my head in that stupid mine. I should be able to see what all the nonsense was about."

"It's not nonsense. And you don't even believe in any of it, so what do you care?"

"Hey, I wanna see, too," Tommy Reynolds said, looking over Austin's shoulder.

"So this is what you spend all your time doing?" Brogan asked, smirking. "You're, what, a ghost buster?"

"Not a ghost buster," Hunter said, clearing his throat. "We're paranormal investigators."

"Oh, sorry, my bad," Brogan said, busting up.

Austin and his friends huddled around the computer, laughing as they watched Hunter and Blake go into the mine. Laughing at the evidence they had collected.

It was twenty of the longest minutes of Hunter's life.

Chapter 27

Something caught Hunter's eye.

They were nearing the end of the episode. The part that Hunter and Blake had filmed after the visit to the mine, back in Hunter's room. The part where they talked about finding Joseph Sanders' photo in the history book, about Blake's dream, and about the knife on the floor in the kitchen.

Hunter was talking about how he heard a noise and then a voice coming from out in the kitchen, when something suddenly flashed across the screen.

"Wait!" Hunter shouted. "Rewind that."

Austin looked over like Hunter was crazy.

"Didn't you guys see that?"

"See what?" Austin said. "See you making a fool of yourself?"

Hunter watched the scene play over again.

"Wait, stop it there!"

Austin paused the clip.

The screen was frozen on an image of Hunter and Blake sitting in chairs in Hunter's room. But there was something in the image that shouldn't have been there. Something Hunter had missed when he was cutting the episode.

There was something black in the top right portion of the screen. A mist of some sort. It was casting a shadow over the set.

"Do you see that?" Hunter said, standing up from the sofa. "Just look at it!"

He had trouble keeping the excitement out of his voice.

Hunter and Blake had seen and heard a lot since the beginning of this paranormal investigation, but they hadn't captured anything as substantial as this. At least they didn't think they had. But here it was.

This was amazing, Hunter thought. Incredible. He would look back on this moment years from now. This was the moment his career as a paranormal investigator began.

And best of all, Hunter was able to share it with this group of skeptics.

"There's no way you can explain that away," he said, pacing the floor. "That's hardcore evidence right there."

Austin just sat there, his face without expression.

"You guys must have rigged this," Brogan said, leaning forward and looking at the screen.

"There's your explanation. You're a hardcore poser. A phony. A fake."

"No, this is all real," Hunter said. "I guarantee it."

"Yeah, that's what they all say," Tommy Reynolds said.

"There's no such thing as ghosts," Travis said in a condescending tone. "I'm sure it's just a glitch in your camera or something. Nothing to get so excited about."

"Don't you see it? That's not a glitch in the camera. That right there is some real supernatural activity. Would you tell them, Austin?"

He looked at Austin for some support, but his brother left him flapping in the wind.

"Travis is right. Probably just a glitch," Austin mumbled. "C'mon, Hunter. It's getting late and we better get home."

Austin closed up the laptop and handed it to Hunter.

“But you saw—”

“C’mon,” Austin said, cutting him off.

Hunter couldn’t believe it.

But at the same time, he could believe it. That’s what most skeptics did when faced with evidence of the paranormal. It never changed their point of view. They just found a way to “logically” explain it away or ignored it all together.

Hunter sighed and shook his head.

Even though he had just learned he had captured the best paranormal evidence of his life, he wasn’t happy.

Chapter 28

Hunter and Austin walked home from Brogan Smith's house. Austin had asked to borrow the car, but their mom said she had shopping to do.

"All that food you two eat doesn't just buy itself."

They walked along the dark streets without talking.

"You know," Austin said, finally breaking the silence. "I think you should know I believe you."

"What?"

"I don't think you doctored your tape," he whispered. "I think that shadow or whatever was real."

Hunter was quiet for a moment, soaking in the oh-so-sweet feeling of having converted a non-believer.

"See? I told you," Hunter said. "I told you."

"Yeah, yeah. But have you thought about what you've done, Hunter?" Austin said, his face looking a shade paler than usual. "I mean, that thing that's followed you back home. It's..."

"It's a danger that goes with the job," Hunter said, echoing something he had heard on *Ghost Adventures*.

"Yeah, but that thing is *bad*, Hunter. It's the thing that knocked me out in the mine."

"What?" Hunter said.

Wow. Austin was really coming clean. Spilling his guts all over the place.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't believe it myself at first. I thought it was just a side effect of getting hit in the head."

"What'd you see?" Hunter asked.

Austin didn't answer for a moment.

"What'd you see, Austin?" Hunter repeated.

"The thing in the video," Austin said, his voice cracking.

"You saw the shadow creature?" Hunter asked.

Austin nodded his head slowly.

"I think so."

"Austin, you have to tell this in front of the camera. We need this for our documentary."

"Give it a rest, Hunter," Austin said. "It's one thing to tell you this. It's another to say it and have you plaster it all over the internet. I know you can't relate, but I have my reputation to think of. I can't go around announcing I see dead things. I mean, look at what happened to that Haley Joel Oswalt or whatever. That's like the kiss of death, man."

"Well, I'm not stopping until I get to the bottom of this," Hunter said.

"You're just thinking of yourself," Austin said. "You're living in some lame fame fantasy dream world. But what about Mom? You've put her in danger. Real danger. You're putting all of us in danger. I believe that you didn't physically do that thing that night in the kitchen with the knife and the gas. But you set it in motion. You and your *investigation* brought that thing back home with us. You want it to be true so bad that it's almost like you invited it in."

Hunter thought about it for a while.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Maybe I did set the whole thing in motion and maybe I accidentally invited the evil entity here. But if I’m responsible for that, I have to be responsible for getting rid of it. I can’t just pretend it doesn’t exist or that it’s not here. Don’t you see?”

“What do you think you can do about it?” Austin said in a wobbly voice.

“You’re scared, aren’t you?”

Austin didn’t answer.

“What are you planning to do?” Austin said, ignoring Hunter’s question.

“It’s a secret,” Hunter said.

He didn’t want Austin to know. If Austin found out that he and Blake were going back to the mine, he might try to stop them. He might tell their mom or Blake’s dad. And that would bring the roof crashing down on them. On all of them.

Austin shook his head and sped up ahead of Hunter. Hunter didn’t try to catch up.

Chapter 29

The next night Hunter went over to Blake's house. They played video games when Blake was supposed to be helping him with his math homework. Hunter didn't mind. His math skills were too far gone.

After several hours of being stuck at the same level in *Gears of War*, Hunter decided it was time to call it a night.

He grabbed his stuff, said goodbye to Blake, and walked out the door into the cool desert evening. He zipped up his jacket and stuffed his hands deep inside his pockets as he walked the few blocks to his house.

It was a dark night. No moon. And some of the street lamps along the path seemed to have burned out.

Hunter liked how the nights were getting colder. It had been a long, hot summer in Tule Creek and he was glad to have some cooler weather. It was beginning to feel like fall, Hunter's favorite time of year. Halloween wasn't too far away and he was looking forward to the horror movies a lot of the stations would be showing.

Suddenly, Hunter heard footsteps behind him. Loud, heavy footsteps hitting the concrete like a pair of bricks.

He turned around, squinting deep into the darkness. His eyes darted nervously from shadow to shadow. The hairs on his arms stood straight up and he began to shiver uncontrollably.

But there was nothing there. Nothing he could see anyway.

He must have imagined it. Maybe it was some sort of desert animal. Or maybe it was, well, Hunter didn't want to think of that other possibility.

He started walking again, picking up his pace.

As he rounded the corner to his street, a strange smell filled the air. Hunter was trying to figure out what it was when he heard the voice. Again.

It was the same voice he'd heard in the kitchen that night. That same horrible, putrid voice from Hell. Hunter felt the hot, sick stench on its breath as it whispered in his ear.

"...Mine forever..."

Hunter's blood ran cold.

He didn't wait around to hear more. He took off in a frenzied sprint, his feet pounding the pavement all the way up to his doorstep. He threw himself inside and locked the door.

Trying to keep that thing out by locking the door was almost laughable. But at that moment, Hunter didn't feel like laughing. He didn't think he would ever laugh again.

Whatever that thing was, it had Joseph Sanders trapped. And it was now after Hunter.

Chapter 30

Hunter sat on the bleachers, watching the football team practice. He smiled to himself when Gunther Phillips, a beast of a freshman, pummeled Brogan into the ground.

Brogan staggered around afterwards, dazed and confused. There should have been little cartoon birds and stars circling his head, he was so out.

Hunter glanced at his cell phone to check the time. He still had another twenty minutes before Austin would be done here. Hunter sighed.

He could have walked home instead of waiting to get a ride with Austin, but he didn't feel like walking alone. Not after what had happened the night before. Not after the voice he had heard and that horrible breathing he had felt on his neck.

Hunter hadn't told anybody about it. Not even Blake. The whole thing was really unsettling. The paranormal investigator inside him needed his mommy. It was all too close. And getting closer. It was becoming too real.

So Hunter sat on the bleachers, waiting for his brother to get done with his football practice. He felt foolish out here, but safe at the same time.

He pulled out a notebook and started doodling. At first he just drew his usual nonsense. But then, without even realizing it, his pencil started drawing a girl's face. Some long dark hair. A pair of large bright eyes. Perfectly shaped lips. A matching nose.

"Hey, that looks a lot like me," a voice said from behind him.

Hunter recognized it immediately and quickly closed the notebook before turning around.

"What are you doing here?" he said, flustered.

"That was supposed to be me, wasn't it?" Heidi said. "C'mon, you can tell me."

Hunter didn't say anything.

"Shouldn't you be out, you know, hunting ghosts or something?" she asked.

"It's not as easy as all that," Hunter said. "It takes a lot of planning, and you have to make sure the equipment is working and stuff."

"So do you, like, lock yourselves in a place all night like they do on TV?" she said, sticking a piece of pink gum in her mouth and chomping away on it.

"Well, we've done a few around here like that. But we didn't find anything."

"Have you ever found anything?" Heidi said. "I mean, I watch *Ghost Adventures*. And as much as I love Zak, I notice that they don't ever really find too much."

"They find stuff sometimes," Hunter said.

"No offense or anything. I just think a lot of their stuff, well, it could go either way, you know? Like some of that EVP stuff, some of that evidence is really weak," she said. "Not that I really care. I don't watch the show for ghosts anyway."

Hunter pulled out the laptop from his backpack.

He cued up *Spirit Hunters* and handed the computer to her.

"Watch this, and tell me that it's weak," he said, smiling.

After Heidi had watched the entire episode, she looked a little white in the face.

"Are you messing with me?" she asked. "I mean, did you doctor this up to make it—"

"No," Hunter said.

"So that shadow, that black thing that passed over the camera, that was real?"

Hunter nodded and smiled again.

"I just can't believe it."

"I know," Hunter said.

"So what are you gonna do with this?" Heidi asked.

"Well, knowing what we know now, we can't very well walk away and leave Joseph Sanders trapped in there for all eternity," Hunter said. "That would be wrong."

"So what are you gonna do?"

She seemed genuinely interested. Hunter felt all warm inside.

"Can you keep a secret, Heidi?" Hunter said, leaning in toward her.

He could smell the sweet sugary pinkness of her gum. She nodded.

"We're going back there this weekend," he whispered loudly. "Blake's turning 16 this Friday and we're gonna drive back out there."

Heidi's eyes grew wide.

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

Hunter let his smile fade, a look of determination taking its place.

"It's our destiny, I think," he said.

"I just think that's the sweetest thing I've ever heard," Heidi said, like she was talking about a puppy. "I mean, that's real compassion."

Hunter felt all gooey inside, hearing Heidi talk that way about him. Like he was some sort of hero or something.

"Hey, do you want to come with us?" he asked, his heart pounding hard inside his chest. "I mean, it's a long drive and all, but we'd sure love to have you along."

Heidi smiled, but Hunter knew it wasn't a yes kind of smile.

"I've got to babysit this weekend," she said.

Hunter tried not to let the disappointment show.

"But I'll take a rain check, if that's all right. I mean, that sort of paranormal stuff could be interesting. Maybe."

The earth had been hit by an asteroid or something. It was now spinning upside down. Exhibit A: Heidi Wyatt, one of the most popular girls in school, the girl Hunter daydreamed about almost nonstop, was going to go on a ghost hunt with him.

"Uh, yeah. Sure," he said coolly. "That sounds good."

"Good," Heidi said.

She smiled. It wasn't the kind of smile he had seen on her face before, all fake and phony and sort of cruel. This one was real and nice.

"You ready, Heidi?" a voice said from the bottom of the bleachers.

Hunter turned to see who it was.

Josh Crowder, her ex-boyfriend.

Heidi's face lit up when she saw him. She flashed him a smile. That same nice and sweet smile that she had given Hunter just a second before. Suddenly they didn't seem as over as all the rumors had made it sound.

She quickly collected her things and stood up. She walked past him, not saying anything or even looking his way.

Hunter gripped the bleacher tightly as the earth returned to its normal axis.

But then she turned around and flashed him another one of those smiles.

"Good luck, Hunter," she said. "I'll be thinking of you this weekend."

Josh Crowder scratched his square jaw.

Chapter 31

It had finally arrived.

Blake's birthday. The day when the keys to the '92 Honda would be his.

The day after they would be able to finally go to the mine. They'd be able to free Sanders. And they'd be able to finish the second part of the episode. Putting *Spirit Hunters* on the map.

Hunter saw big dollar signs and television deals. He saw the networks begging him and Blake to drop out of high school to travel the country for their hit television show. He saw himself meeting Zak, Nick, and Aaron at paranormal events, treating him and Blake like respected colleagues.

He saw Heidi dropping Josh Crowder into the relationship trash bin like he was bad Chinese takeout. He saw himself taking her shopping, buying her whatever she wanted. Her talking the way she had talked about him on the bleachers. Saying he was so brave and good. And compassionate.

Hunter saw all of it within his reach.

But so much of it was riding on Blake. And whether or not Blake would be able to build up enough courage for the drive.

That Friday Blake had his birthday party at the paintball course on the outskirts of Tule Creek. Even though afterwards he couldn't stop talking about how nervous he had been, he had passed the driving test like he had designed the course himself.

Hunter did his best to help Blake celebrate. He had gotten him the new *Red Dead Redemption* video game and did his best impression of a dead duck out on the course. He didn't plan it that way, but he was distracted, thinking about the next day. And the mine. It seemed every shot found him. By the end, he was sore all over and looked like a box of melted crayons.

"See you tomorrow?" Hunter said when the party ended.

Blake nodded.

"Yeah, see you then."

Hunter thought Blake looked a little bit queasy when he said it. Maybe it was all the birthday cake.

Hunter waited out in the parking lot for Austin to pick him up.

He felt strange. Like something was pushing and pulling at him, forcing him to go in directions he had no control over. He imagined it was what the Ouija pointer felt when it was being dragged across the board.

He shivered and zipped up his jacket.

He needed to focus. Tomorrow was going to be a big day.

"Eyes on the prize," he mumbled to himself. "Eyes on the prize."

Chapter 32

The nightmare again.

It was more violent than it had ever been before. And more real.

This time Hunter could see the thing pulling him down in the well. It wasn't just a shapeless dark figure like in all the other nightmares.

He could see it clearly now in the black depths of the water. It was a creature. Its face rotted away. Eyes that glowed bright red. And the smell. Oh, God, the smell. The smell of rotting brains and tongues and livers. The smell of cancer-eaten lungs and steaming bowels dropping on the icy sidewalk. And of death.

The creature held on to Hunter's ankle and looked up at him, a terrible, sinister smile across its hideous lips. It was saying something.

"Mineeee..."

Hunter woke up screaming this time, sweat soaking through his shirt.

He never got back to sleep. The smell kept him up.

Chapter 33

The first light of dawn came through the window. Hunter glanced at the alarm clock.

It was early.

Might as well get a move on, he thought.

He went to the bathroom and splashed water on his face. He started getting ready, trying to be as quiet as possible. He didn't want to wake Austin or his mom.

He'd told them the night before that he and Blake were going on a hike just on the outskirts of town, and it seemed like they'd bought it. But Hunter didn't want to run into either of them this morning. He wasn't a natural-born liar and he didn't want to have to repeat the lie and try to sell it all over again.

Hunter texted Blake.

"U ready man?" he wrote.

Hunter didn't hear anything back for a long time. He started getting nervous. Maybe Blake was backing out. Maybe he had spilled it by accident or something and his dad had taken back the Honda. Maybe...

Then he heard the sound of a car pull up in the driveway.

He looked out his window.

It was the Honda.

Hunter smiled.

Blake had really come through.

Hunter grabbed his backpack with the camera gear and digital recorder and headed downstairs quietly. He locked the door behind him and walked down the path.

A sweaty and pale Blake sat behind the wheel.

"So you didn't chicken out," Hunter said, getting into the car.

"I don't know about this, Hunter," Blake said, a pool of sweat gathering in the indentation above his lip. "Maybe this is a bad idea."

"It's a great idea," Hunter said. "This is gonna put us on the map, dude."

"I've been thinking maybe there are more important things," Blake said.

Hunter shook his head.

"No way. What could be more important than this?"

"Well, for starters, not getting in trouble with my dad," Blake said. "But that's only a small part. I just, I have a real bad feeling about today."

Blake glanced in the rearview mirror like he was expecting to see somebody in it. He looked all shifty and on edge.

"Don't worry, man," Hunter said. "You're gonna do great. You're just nervous because you know what a big day it's gonna be for us."

Hunter sighed.

"I really think something bad is gonna happen," Blake said. "I've got this feeling."

"C'mon, Blake. Baby steps. Start up the engine," Hunter said. "Baby steps."

Blake looked over and then back in front of him. He took a deep breath and turned the key in the ignition.

The car started up. Hunter smiled and punched Blake in the arm. Then suddenly, before Blake could put the car in reverse, the car door behind Hunter opened and somebody got inside.

Hunter turned around.

It was Austin.

“God damn it, Austin!” Hunter yelled. “What the hell are you doing? You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Quit it,” Austin said, rolling his eyes. “Just quit it. It’s too early for your drama *queen-osity*. I know exactly what you’re up to and don’t try and sell me on that ‘just taking a hike, ma’am’ BS of yours. It wasn’t convincing last night and I’m not buying any of it today either.”

How could he tell? Hunter felt sick. He felt everything falling apart and unraveling. He didn’t know what to say.

“If you’re dumb enough to go back to that place, then you might as well have someone looking out for you,” Austin said.

“What?” Hunter said. “So you’re saying that you’re coming with us?”

He looked over at Blake. His face was all lit up, like his brain had been scooped out and replaced with a candle. He reminded Hunter of some of the dumb patterns in those pumpkin carving booklets with stupid names like *Slap Happy*.

But Hunter felt the same way.

Suddenly the world seemed full of possibilities. Blake had reached deep inside himself and was driving them to the mine. Austin had done a complete 180 on the whole paranormal thing and was actually coming along on an expedition, maybe even joining the crew. And Heidi. Heidi had smiled at him twice—really smiled, at *him*—and said she wanted to come along on a hunt.

He felt his strength growing from the inside out, like he had Zak Bagans muscles rippling all over the place.

“I’m only coming along because I know Mom would want me to,” Austin said. “And because I don’t want you two fools to get into an accident because Blake here is too nervous to drive.”

Blake let out a long and loud sigh of relief. He turned off the engine and handed the keys to Austin. He looked like the weight of a caved-in mine had been lifted off his shoulders.

“But I’m telling you,” Austin said, as they played musical chairs with him getting behind the wheel, Blake taking the passenger seat, and Hunter bringing up the rear. “If things get bad down there in the mine, I’m getting out. And I’m bringing you two twerps with. Even if I have to drag you out by your ears.”

Normally, Hunter would have argued. This was his investigation after all. Nobody told Zak Bagans what to do. And nobody was going to tell him what to do. But he was so excited that Austin was coming along, that he let it go.

“You hear what I’m saying?” Austin said.

“Loud and clear,” Hunter said, grinning.

Chapter 34

Austin pulled the car into the parking lot of Sanders Mine. A cloud of dust engulfed the Honda as it came to a stop.

They were here. Finally here, Hunter thought. Again.

His stomach fluttered and tightened up.

He hadn't expected to be so nervous. But now that they were here, he couldn't help but feel all the pressure pressing down on him.

What if they weren't able to free Sanders from the spirit that haunted the mine? What if the thing clung to them instead? What if they'd never be able to get rid of it?

Heidi would be expecting the second part of the episode and Hunter didn't want to let her down either. In fact, how things went today might be the one key determining factor in how things went with her.

Hunter knew he would have to be at his sharpest. At his very bravest.

"Are we ready to do this?" he said in his deepest voice, trying to rally the troops.

"I'm ready," Blake said, sounding like a leaf in the wind.

"All right, but remember what I said," Austin said. "I'm here to watch out for you two idiots. And if I say we get out, we get out."

"Absolutely," Hunter said, like it was his idea to put his brother in charge of pulling the plug on the most important thing in his life.

They got out the car, slamming the doors behind them.

Hunter slung the backpack with all the equipment over his shoulders and started down the gravelly path. He could see the deep black mouth of the mine in the distance, framed by several wooden beams.

Hunter's heart sped up a little bit just seeing it. He looked back at Blake.

Blake was as white as a ghost.

"Wait," Hunter said, walking toward the little graveyard. "There's something I want to do first."

The other two followed him.

Hunter read some of the names on the crude wooden crosses. He soon came across the one he was looking for.

Joseph Sanders. Rest in Piece.

"Man, that's sad," Hunter whispered. "They didn't even know how to spell *peace*."

"I don't think he lost any sleep over it," Austin said solemnly, not making it sound like a joke.

"Yeah," Blake said. "That's probably the least of his worries. If you know what I mean."

He signaled with his head toward the mine, the whites of his eyes growing large.

"Joseph Sanders," Hunter began, his voice louder now as he looked down at the dirt under the grave marker. "We have come to set you free. Your long nightmare is almost at an end. Soon you will finally be able to rest. In peace."

Chapter 35

“Welcome to part two of our exploration of Sanders Mine,” Hunter said into the camera. “We’re going in, and hoping to make it out alive.”

He forced a smile.

Deep down, he had started to have a few second thoughts about the whole thing. But he couldn’t let the viewers at home see that. He had to act brave. Like Zak Bagans before they were about to go into one of their lockdowns.

Hunter ran a hand through his hair for good measure, trying to bring it forward and mat it down like his hero did with his hair. He turned the camera toward the darkness of the cave and switched to night vision.

“Here we go,” Blake said from behind him.

“Yep, here we go again,” Austin said.

Hunter led the way down the now familiar path into the darkness. He thought he heard what sounded like dripping water. But he didn’t stop to investigate. They were on a mission. Water was appropriate, Hunter thought. They were after bigger fish.

They walked on deeper into the mine, their feet slapping against the wooden planks.

Blake started whistling.

“We need complete quiet,” Hunter said, turning around.

“Sometimes it helps to whistle,” Blake said in a shaky voice.

They soon got to the part of the mine where the ceiling started closing in. And after that to the room with all the names carved into the walls.

Hunter stepped in, panning around in a 360 motion and then looking for the carving that had started it all. The name.

What he saw almost made him drop his camera.

There, scrawled across the wall in a dark red color, across the name of Joseph Sanders, was the word *MINE*.

“What the hell?” Hunter said, going up to the wall.

He placed a finger on the red lettering.

It was still wet. Hunter didn’t think it was spray paint. It was much thicker.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Blake said. “What’s going on here?”

Hunter looked at the bloody writing, dumbfounded for a moment.

“He’s declaring war,” Hunter said. “He’s saying that Sanders is his, and that he’s going to trap his spirit here for all eternity. Unless we don’t do something about it.”

Hunter felt the skin on his arms quiver and change into something else. He could feel the thing, the creature, somewhere in here with them.

He thought back to that scrambling shadow down the shaft and he shivered.

“It’s time to end this once and for all,” Hunter said.

“Easy, bro,” Austin said. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

He was looking up at the red writing, his eyes bugging.

“This thing means business.”

“So do I,” Hunter said.

That was a good line for the camera, he thought.

Chapter 36

They sat on the floor in a circle. They were in the autograph room, in the room where Hunter and Blake had first captured Sanders' cries for help on the digital recorder. And had first contacted the creature that plagued the mine.

Hunter and Blake had set the camera up in the corner of the room and had spaced out the digital recorders.

Hunter pulled out a folded-up piece of paper and hit it with the light from his flashlight. He had been doing research on how to get rid of evil spirits. And one of the ways was to do an exorcism.

Hunter had seen this happen a few times in some of the *Ghost Adventures* episodes. He didn't know if it was really going to work, but it seemed like a good place to start. He had found some websites that had posted the Biblical passages that were said to cast out evil spirits. He had printed them out.

"We drive you from us, whoever you may be, unclean spirits," Hunter said, reading from the paper in his shaking hand.

The words were thick in his throat, like peanut butter, and he found himself having to force them out.

"All satanic powers, all infernal invaders, all wicked legions, assemblies and sects..."

A low howl suddenly came from the mine shaft.

Hunter couldn't tell it was just the wind or if there was something more sinister behind it.

"In the name and by the power of our lord, Jesus Christ, may you be snatched away and driven from the Church of God. God the Holy Ghost commands you."

Another howl cut through Hunter's words, bouncing off the walls. Blake let out a terrified whimper.

"That's it. We're getting the hell out of here," Austin said, standing up. "I don't care about this Sanders guy, and I sure as hell don't care about this mine. Let whatever this thing is have it."

"Yeah," Blake said. "This is way beyond me."

"We're not leaving yet," Hunter said. "We're not finished."

Just then a giant gust of wind blew from down the main tunnel and into the room.

"C'mon, Hunter. Remember what you said?" Austin said. "That'd you'd listen to me."

He said it in a soft, scared voice that was barely above a whisper and almost drowned out by the fierce wind.

"No!" Hunter shouted. "I still have work to do."

He looked back down at the paper, flapping in his hands. He hoped it was just the wind.

"I command you, unholy spirit, leave this place and let the spirit of Joseph Sanders go!" Hunter said.

A faint voice came from somewhere out in the shaft.

"Help... me..."

It was Sanders. Still trapped by the evil demon that haunted the mine.

"That's it," Hunter said, standing up. "We've got to save him."

Hunter ripped the camera off the tripod and ran out the room. He followed the faint voice, still calling out. It was coming from the end of the mine.

"This isn't his mine anymore!" Hunter said back to Blake.

But when he turned around, Blake wasn't there. Neither was Austin.

They were still back in the room. Hunter was all alone, chasing after the creature haunting the mine.

He didn't care. There was no place for fear here. This was too important.

Hunter continued down the shaft, eventually making it down to the room at the end of the mine. The voice continued to repeat help me, but it didn't seem to be coming from inside the small room anymore.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, Hunter caught a faint glow coming from one of the walls.

There was another room behind it, Hunter thought.

He remembered what the guidebook had said. That the mine used to go on for much farther in the old days. Before it was closed off for safety.

Hunter kicked and pounded his fists against the glowing wall until—surprisingly—it started crumbling, large pieces of it falling to the ground.

The orange light became stronger and on the other side of the disappearing wall, he saw something else.

It was a white figure. A man with a white beard, his clothes old and dusty. His hollow eyes looking out from the darkness.

At first tight fingers of fear squeezed Hunter's heart when he saw the man. But then he realized what it meant.

Hunter pointed the camera at the figure and started walking toward him.

He had just struck it rich.

He was capturing an actual ghost on film. Something that couldn't be argued with or dispelled or debunked.

Hunter was making history.

"I've come to free you, Sanders," he said.

The ghost backed away toward the other side of the room, cowering in the corner, and hiding its face.

"You don't need to be frightened," Hunter said, walking closer, stepping over the crumbled pieces of the wall in front of him. "He can't keep you trapped here anymore. You're free now."

Hunter knelt down by the ghost, trying to comfort the trapped soul.

And then Sanders looked up at him.

The room suddenly began to glow with a fiery orange light. And Sanders' face started to change. He curled his lips up into a smile. His eyes started to glow brightly like two red coals. His face turned dark until it was nothing more than a shadow.

The room started shaking, filled with an evil laughter. It was coming from Sanders. Or what Hunter had thought had been Sanders.

"I told you," the shadow said. "I told you that you would be... *miinnneee*."

The thing grinned a ghastly and rotting smile and reached out, grabbing Hunter's wrist. It felt like the thing in his nightmare, in the well. The same thing that had been there with him in the well.

Hunter screamed, coming to the sudden and horrible realization that there had been no Sanders. That it had just been a ploy by the evil spirit to get him here.

Hunter realized something else, too, in those final terrible few moments. The evil spirit grasping his wrist didn't belong to the mine.

It was part of the well.

It had been haunting Hunter. It had been haunting him for eight years, ever since that day in the well. And it had finally gotten him.

There was no Sanders. No dark entity in the mine. Only the evil spirit haunting Hunter all this time.

Hunter had provoked the thing, not knowing what it had been. And now...

Now it had what it had always wanted.

It had Hunter.

Hunter screamed and screamed and screamed as the creature grinned and pulled him toward it.

Pulled him under.

Chapter 37

“Are you okay, man?” Austin said, out of breath. “We heard you screaming.”

He and Blake had crawled their way down the shaft when they heard Hunter’s bloodcurdling cries. They had found him sitting in the corner of the small room, dazed and as if in a fog. The camera was face down in the ground.

“I’m fine,” Hunter said. “You’re right, Austin. We should get out of here.”

Austin looked over at Blake, an expression of worry spreading over his face.

“Sure, man,” he said. “Let’s go then.”

Austin helped Hunter up and the three of them crawled and walked their way out of the cave, stopping by the first room to pick up the digital recorders.

“Look, dude,” Blake said, pointing to the wall where the writing had been over Sanders’ name. “The letters are gone!”

Austin looked up. Blake was right. The old carved names and the graffiti were still there. But the blood red MINE was gone.

“Hunter, you must have saved Sanders,” Austin said, patting him on the back.

“It’s true,” Blake said. “It feels different in here. It’s like the whole mine just exhaled or something. That thing that was here, the dark cloud or evil spirit or whatever it was that haunted the place, is gone.”

“Whatever you say,” Hunter slurred.

They gathered their things and walked out of the mine, back into the bright late September sunshine.

Conclusion

That night Hunter woke up at three o'clock. Nothing unusual in that. Except that this time, he didn't wake up from the nightmare in a cold sweat. This time he woke up in a perfect frame of mind. Perfectly collected. At one with what he was feeling. With what was going on inside him.

He opened his bedroom door and walked down the long hallway and out into the kitchen. He walked over to the stove and turned on the gas, making sure the flame didn't catch. He listened to the hissing sound and smiled.

Hunter walked over to the knife block sitting on the counter and pulled out the largest and heaviest knife. He held it in his hands, admiring the way the kitchen light danced off the edge of the shiny blade.

Yes, it had taken eight years to get here. Eight long years. Eight years of trying to scare the little twit in his dreams. Eight years of being powerless to do anything except come to life in those dreams. Keeping himself alive by reminding him over and over of the time they had first met down in the well.

Thank all the demons in Hades for that mine and the Ouija board. Without those two elements, the little fool might have never believed in him. Never given him the energy to manifest. The boy would have stayed out of his reach forever.

And then the attempt the little "ghost hunter" had made at exorcising him. That had really been the cherry on top. What most people didn't know was that those never worked. Exorcisms were just a bunch of mumbo jumbo.

Yes, it had taken eight long years to get here. But now that the moment had finally arrived, he could honestly say that it had all been worth it.

The thing that used to be Hunter held the smooth handle of the knife lovingly in its hand and made its way down the hall to Austin's room.

THE END

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Demon at My Window

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